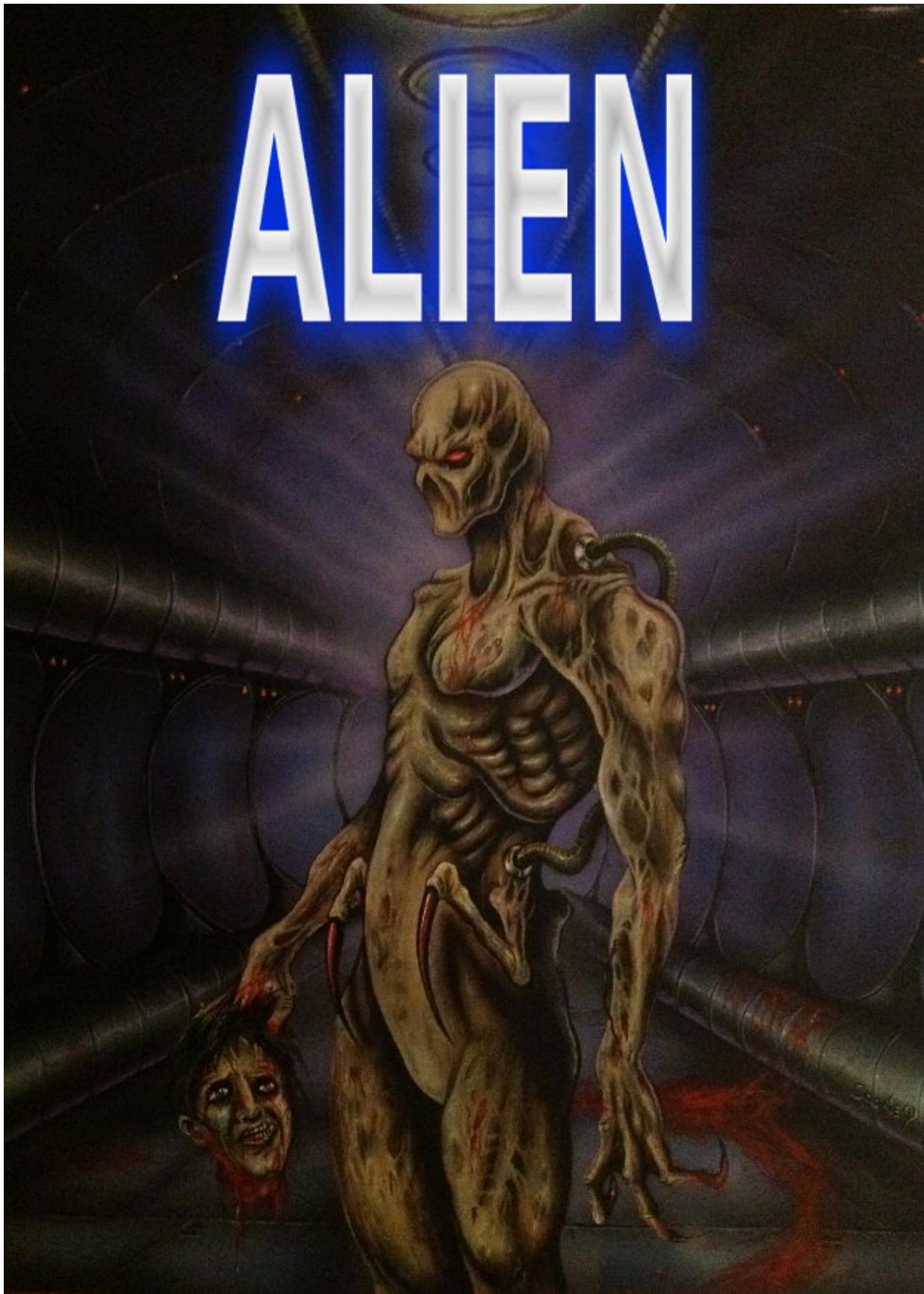


ALIEN



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Edited
By

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GRAPHICS

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First Edition

Horrified Press

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FOREWORD

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Out of this world stories:

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COSMIC PUPPET MASTER

Neil Leckman

All around me are familiar faces
Staring outward at distant places
Unseen I walk among the many minds
Touching them all, so many kinds
Feasting on visions both dark and light
Not a single one put up a fight
I was a cosmic puppet master
Pulling them all faster and faster
Whirlpool of visions ideas and thought
Random without reason or plot
I rise up and mankind with me
Trapped until I set them free
I went to the void, I knew I should
In emptiness I thought, it was good
All the souls cried to be free
It was far too late, now trapped in me
I ate each like fruit to settle my hunger
I ate and ate til I could no longer
I released what was left set it free
In silence I realise there was only me...

TO THE STARS AND BACK

A Freudian love story with aliens

T.M. Simmler

OK, listen, that's how it happened: the doorbell rang, I opened up and there she was, mumbling she'd forgotten her keys. She pushed me aside, strolled straight into the kitchen, fetched a bottle of beer, opened it on the edge of the desk and broke off a piece of wood. I, totally befuddled, tottered behind her. She plunked down onto the couch, the new couch, mind you, gulped the beer down in one go, burped and - I mean, really, you should have seen her: drained twice in the gutter, trousers torn and so dirty they were able to walk without her and shirt fucked up with one tit almost sagging through the crack. Her hair looked like she had rinsed it with old grease from the fish 'n' chip shop. She reeked like shit wrapped in shite, like she was the great bum king and then she put her feet on the table and I swear, if she were a lad, she'd have scratched her bullocks, the sodding cow and me, I'm like vibrating in front of her and there's a vein throbbing in my temple with 180 bpm and you know what she said then?

"What?" she said.

Like nothing had happened and she hadn't been down to the pub to grab a quick pint eight days ago, kiss-kiss, bye-bye. Eight fucking days and no phone call, no text messages, nothing. None of the guys had seen her or heard of her either, like she had been beamed up and vanished from the face of the earth. Well, she had been, actually, but I didn't know that back then - sorry, did I just spoil it for you? Never mind. Where was I? Yeah... all I knew then was that she ponged like a marinated fart and was messing up my new couch. So I asked her where she had been all week long. I was like, totally cool, though all the while I was digging my nails hard into the palms of my hands and maybe the teetering was giving me away a bit, but she pretty much knew that when I'm like that, she'd better not try to sell me some shit and think twice before opening her pie-hole, if she wants to savour a peaceful, quiet evening. And she looked me straight into the eyes and told me that she had been abducted by an U.F.O. and released about an hour or two ago. I caught some breath and went all wide-eyed.

"The fucking WHAT?" I asked.

“U.F.O. Ye ken an U.F.O, aye? Aliens and stuff?” she said in that damned Scottish accent she always slipped back into when she was sloshed. “And really, love, can you stop wobbling and messing about? I honestly need to wind down a tad.”

This was a new low. This was even worse than last time, when she was gone four days and upon coming back claimed that she somehow had lost her memory and been mistaken for an Arab called Hasid and taken into custody and got gang-banged by a bunch of heavily tattooed convicts shouting ‘Hand me the young goat herder’ at her, before a DNA sample was taken, while in truth she had been shagging some Lisa in Bristol, spending 300 quid from my bank account for the flight alone. And how many red-haired Arabs do you know of, anyway?

“Wind down?” I shouted. “What fucking trip do you need winding down from, you mendacious goddamned dyke?”

“Don’t make me angry. You won’t like it when I’m angry,” she sneered. I knew that sentence from somewhere.

“Won’t I?” I cried. “What’s going to happen? You’re turning into The Incredible Butch?”

That’s when she squinted her eyes, which made her look like Cunt Eastwood, pointed her index finger at my bird cage, bent her thumb and straight out of her finger shot a steel blue beam and pulverized my canary.

“Fuck! COOKIE!!”

There was less ash in the cage than you could tip from a cigarette. Not even one single bloody feather left.

“You’ve killed Cookie, you bleeding...” and I thought, yeah, maybe she’s right and I should stop screaming and calling her names and messing about in general, you know. Keep it calm. Relaxed.

“Amazed, are you, Sophie?” she asked and I had to admit that I was.

So: “Fuck, yeah.” I admitted, sat down next to her, because my legs were shaking and there was something not quite right with my cardiovascular system - and with my senses, for not only had I just seen something quite outlandish and impossible, but now I was sitting right beside her without smelling her anymore.

“I wonder how amazed those alien fuckers were when they threw me out of their U.F.O. and I landed on the ground and screamed, totally bedazzled and puzzled and pointed that blazing finger at them and that flash

zoomed straight out of it and fried them. Sylvie Lues - Star Amazon. Fetch me another beer, will you, Sweetie?"

I brought two and pondered; what the hell and put a bottle of schnapps right next to them.

"Great," she grinned. "Let's have a galactic bender, huh?"

She wiped the glass away and drank the booze straight from the bottle. Alien abduction seems to fuck with your table manners. She burped again, covering a fart with it.

"It was like this - I've been to the pub, what, seven, eight days ago? I drink some, chat with the guys, drink some more and think, I'd call it a night, buy two or the three bottles at the kiosk and get home to the wifey."

"The wifey?" I thought and wondered if she had been abducted by some intergalactic truck drivers with that new macho persona of hers, but at least she didn't talk Scot anymore.

"Well, I'm halfway through the park and I could already see the lights of the kiosk when all of a sudden there was that brightness just above me. Like a patch of daylight in the middle of the night. And I looked up and there was that thing, broad as an Irish catholic church, all looking chrome and polished and massive and then some kind of hatch opened up and a yellow light rained down on me like a golden shower from God himself and I felt all warm and..."

"Ahem, Sylvie? Would you mind?" I sure didn't want to stop her flow and from getting all poetic, but, hey, I'm Church of England and I know that's old-fashioned and such, but that metaphor did somewhat bugger me.

"Oh my, sorry, love. Here I am, abducted by and experimented on by bleeding aliens and all that's on my mind is offending YOUR FUCKING RELIGION."

I'm not the brightest cookie and I can be one stubborn bitch, but by now even I had learned to back down before she charges up The One Finger of Death.

"Sorry." I mumbled sheepishly, eyes cast down.

"Nah, never mind," Sylvie conceded. "Let's just say I felt like drenched in honey and I was more yellow than a Jap with liver cirrhosis. And I was totally stiff, couldn't move a muscle. The light paralyzed me, compressed me. It wasn't squeezing me; it was more like I was stuck in a garden hose. And then I heard this voice, a sombre, deep drone."

"Oooh. What did it say?"

“Well, it told me the secret of world peace, the meaning of life, if there was a God and where to get the best curry in Liverpool. What the fuck do you think it said? It was an alien drone. How am I supposed to understand that shit? Jesus, Soph’, we’ve got neighbours who can’t speak English and you expect some life-form from fuck knows where to take some lessons before abducting me? This isn’t Star Trek, love. It was... droning about. Anyway - as I heard that voice I realized I was some six foot above the ground and then it took my breath away. Literally. Sucked it straight out of my lungs and me straight into the ship and I fainted.”

“Sucked you in...” I was feeling quite devotional. Tell me - how many women can claim that their lover got sucked to the stars?

“Yeah. I mean, I never made it through the sucking part, since I had fainted by then. When I came by I was laying on a steel table, strapped. And five aliens stood around me. The strange thing was - I was totally calm. Feeling quite well. Bit lofty.”

My mouth went slack.

“Galactic drugs.” I was pretty jealous, let me tell you that.

“Maybe. Guess so.” She took another long sip from the booze. It was a pretty good schnapps, but I guess it somewhat paled compared with outer space Ecstasy. She was gulping it down like water.

“And the five aliens were looking at me. You remember ‘Close Encounters of the Third Kind’? That Spielberg film?”

“They looked like that?” Amazing, I thought. Beings made of light; etheric, beautiful, strange creatures.

“Fuck they did. They were gobs of snot. Like something that fell from the table at McDonalds. Like The Thing from The Fantastic Four comics topped with double cheese. They made the Smog Monster look like a fucking Playboy bunny. And when I say that they stared at me, I’m just guessing. Maybe some of those slime-oozing holes were eyes, maybe not. Maybe they were wanking each other off via ESP. Those suckers just stood around and dripped. And I was shouting: ‘Wait ‘till The Doctor comes! The Doctor will kick your motherfucking ugly hide!’ So, yeah, I guess I was somewhat drugged out. And they stood. And stood. They never moved the whole time and that ship was totally empty. No fancy cockpit, no computers, nothing. If they’ve experimented on me and I guess they did, judging from that laser shooting finger I’ve got here, I don’t know how they did it, for there were no operating tools, either. I was lying down with my

arms, my boobs and my legs strapped down and they were trickling off. I lost my sense of time, couldn't tell Saturday from Jonathan Ross and then, zapp, there was that light again, the strapping came off, my lungs felt like burning pieces of coal, a door to nowhere opened and I was gone, back at the park. The light vanished, I waved about, pointed at them and blasted them to smithereens. I panicked a bit, shook my hand like I had just accidentally fisted the Queen and whoops went the park bench."

She threw back her head, laughed and then she looked at me with a mean grin, stretched her finger and bent her thumb. I almost pissed myself, spilled half of my beer and felt my heart wince.

Nothing.

There was a shitload of curses on my mind, but they never made it to my tongue.

"Ain't it cool?" she squealed joyously. "When I'm getting angry, it's like all of my anger and my aggressions bundle in that finger and it gets all hot and feels like a balloon. But when I'm relaxed, I can control it. See?"

She frowned, her lips tightened and I had one cushion less.

"Took me just an hour to figure out." She sounded proud. Me, I was just gasping.

"Then I strolled over to the kiosk, bought me a Jägermeister and saw the date on 'The Guardian'. Fuck me running - eight days. I was thinking some hours, maybe a day, but not a whole week. I got me another Jägermeister and then I asked the clerk if he had seen a strange light. But no. Jesus, I'm really somewhat tired."

There was no use arguing that. Being the victim of an alien abduction and then drinking a bottle of hard liquor would be quite a chore for anyone, I guess.

She stretched out and gave a little moan, stood up, undressed, threw her clothes in the approximate direction of the washing machine, shook her bony ass and strolled towards the bed.

"Join me?" she asked, giving her voice a hoarse, wanton tone.

Trying to sound casual, I said: "Guess you'll want to grab a shower first?" and she gave me a look as if I had been the one that fell from the sky.

"Can't be that bad." she answered, sniffing at her armpit. "I don't smell a thing."

Truth be told, she only could have smelled worse by being dead for eight days, but I kept quiet. Not only because I was afraid of her, but

because I was used to keep quiet in our relationship. She always was the domineering one and I was, well, *the wifey*.

“Strange. I’m quite horny.”

I had already guessed that. Sighing, I went after her.

And it didn’t turn out to be a fun ride.

Since she had told me that she was tired, no time was wasted on foreplay. Instead, she shoved my head down and held it in a vice with her thighs.

“Come on, give Momma what she needs.” she demanded.

And I started licking her like a cat in front of a gallon of milk. I thought that from the corner of my eye I saw her pubic hair moving a bit and then about her pussy giving me mange, but kept sucking ferociously on her clit, all the while trying to hold my breath as long as I could and avoiding her Christina piercing. I got stuck once with my own tongue piercing and though we had a bit of a laugh then, I’d rather not get tied to her cunt now that it reeked like she had been dildooded with a dead rat on a stick. I shoved three fingers up her vagina, scratched her ass, ate her out like a happy meal, till she finally moaned, screamed and started to snore. A brain-dead scaffolder couldn’t have been more affectionate.

There was no way I would be able to sleep, so I went back to the couch, smoked some cigarettes and felt queasy. What had they done to her? Mixed up her DNA? Twisted some genes? Rearranged her synapses? What if she started to shrink all of a sudden? Or, even worse, bloated? She already stood six foot, trim, firm and muscular. Thank God, she wasn’t as square anymore as she was a year ago, when she was hooked on steroids. Now that was a bleak time. The drugs didn’t exactly sit well with her short fuse. One night I took a good look at her clitoris and told her that one inch more would make her my hubby. I lost a front tooth. The finger was bad enough, but there were so many more frightening possibilities. Maybe she woke up and had turned into a bug? Or she had been impregnated and nine months from now we were going to be the proud parents of a gigantic hairy eyeball. Something might burst out of her chest. I considered hundreds of possible scenarios. And then I realized that those that ended with her dying on me weren’t the worst ones. In the bad scenarios she stayed with me. Ever after.

The next morning she told me: “I’m sorry I’m causing you so much work.”

I didn't think that work was the right word and said so, but she shook her head.

"No. It's exactly the right word. Do you really think I can leave the flat much, considering the state I'm in? Go back to my job?"

Now here was a point I really hadn't given a thought.

"I've missed a week without an excuse. And even if we left that fact slide for the moment - take a wild guess, what will happen the next time the boss gets on my nerves? And I'd never been too fond of my colleagues, either. The whole fucking firm would be a heap of ash before my break. And don't even start thinking about me handling any kind of bureaucratic affairs. Like going to the employment office. Fuck, I guess even shopping is out of the question. The first octogenarian who starts counting his change at the store checkout gets blown from his walker. Toddlers on the bus, dogs in the park, panpipe playing Peruvian ... at sunset, Liverpool wouldn't be on the map anymore. Methinks I'll settle for the quiet life of a housewife."

And it was a point I really, really didn't like. I've always loved having some time on my own, with her off to work or down to the pub, even before she got scary. Moreover, being the sole provider never was an ambition of mine. But she was right. She could bring a plane down just by flipping the bird. It would be safer to let a starved Rottweiler run loose on a playground.

I shuffled to work without having slept a wink, like a zombie with the mother of all headaches, feeling all crummy and wretched, pulling a face all day that made the customers stumble out of the drugstore backwards and broke two bottles of perfume I had to pay for. Now, if you think I was in a bad mood then, you should have seen me when I got back home. The flat was a pigsty. In merely nine hours Sylvie had managed to make it look like it had been redecorated by Attila the Hun and his merry vandals.

"Whoa, fuck," she greeted me. "I'm so *bored*."

"Bored?" I cried. "How could turning my flat into the temple of the marauding soldier get you bored?"

"Don't you dare shout at me, Sophie!"

What were the odds that the white stuff on the mirror next to the rolled up twenty pounds was some spilled sugar?

"You can get out and blow my money on cocaine but can't be arsed to buy a loaf of bread, you cunt?"

"FUCK YOU, SOPHIE!" The flash missed my left ear by an inch or two and left a black hole in the wall where my Depeche Mode collection

had been.

“Oh shit, shit, shit... I’m sorry... I’m so sorry...” she sobbed. And cried a river. I sat down next to her, put my arm around her, tried to soothe her and she huddled against me, wailed and stuttered excuses, caressed my face and whined some more. Finally the crying ceased and she started to fondle my right breast, played with the nipple, twitching it gently and what can I say - I got aroused. No, not aroused - my pussy pulsated, my spine tingled and my nerves itched from desire. I remember thinking: ‘What am I doing here, for goodness sake?’ and then stopped thinking and took her index finger to my lips, started to suck on it slowly and got even more excited. I was hot and I was shivering and I took her finger out of my mouth, rubbed it through the cocaine traces and put her hand down my trousers and started to masturbate. Ever had a wank with an amphetamine stained finger? Feels like you’re getting fucked by a nine inch cock with electrical heating. I came in an instant and I guess little steam clouds shot out of my ears. And I was still hornier than a pubescent weasel. I ripped down her trousers, tore her knickers apart and went down on her. I wanted to fuck her so bad she wouldn’t know whether to scream from lust or agony. She came twice, clutching my head, her thighs trembling around my neck and screaming six ways to Sunday. I crawled up, nibbled on her ear and, crazed with lust, begged her to do me. That’s when she lit up a Benson, eyed me down with a nasty little sneer and palpable disdain and said: “Nah. I’m too cool for that.”

I went pale. Not just your usual, run of the mill pale in the face, but completely - even my toenails lost their colour. I ran to the bathroom, hunched on the toilet and cried. Cried, because she had humiliated me again, because she always was able to humiliate me, because of the whole woe begotten, shitty situation and because I had fallen out of love long before the abduction and because there was a void, a black hole, a hunger and despair, where this love once had been. And because I was such a piteous, stupid bitch who desperately wanted that love back just to feel complete again. My own neediness crushed me and I sobbed more and more, so it took me quite some time to notice that she was standing on the threshold, nonchalantly swinging a sledge-hammer sized dildo like Charlie Chaplin his cane.

“But I’m not too cool to fuck you up the ass, bitch.” she said.

“Piss off, Sylvie. Just piss off,” I snivelled, tears mingling with snot.

She grabbed me, pulled me up, docked me hard, dragged me to the bed by my hair, pushed my face into the pillows and screamed:

“Know what I think, Soph'? I think a good, hard butt-fuck might clear your god-damned brain!”

I wriggled, kicked, shouted at her and suddenly she was gone. That monstrosity never even touched my buns. I turned around and there she stood at the window, staring at the sky.

“A riveder le stelle.” she said.

Who knew she spoke French? My head cleared, the crying stopped and I knew, with absolute certainty, this was going to stop here and now.

“I want you to leave my flat. Now. If you ever come back, I'll kill you, you psychopathic perv.” I felt good saying it.

“Shut up.” Her voice was barely a whisper.

“Or what?” I asked. “You're going to slap me around some more? Or will you vaporize me with that finger of yours? Go on. I don't care. I'd rather vanish into thin air than to spend a single minute more in your company. You think getting abducted by some stupid aliens has changed you, do you? Let me tell you something - you haven't changed a bit. You've just grown from a patronizing, abusive bitch to a patronizing, abusive bitch with a spacey finger. Fondling my ass at the pub? Patting my head when I cooked your favourite dinner or cracked a joke? Plucking my earlobe when I fucked you to your satisfaction? And these were the good times, when I didn't wake up to an appointment at the dentist or had to call in sick because my eyes were black and blue. It's over, Sylvie. It has been over for longer than I dare thinking of, but I was a coward and that's what cowards do - we encourage you bullies. It's our job to give you sense and meaning and importance but now I quit, Sylvie. I finally quit.”

She was still staring out of window and her voice was still a coarse whisper.

“That's it? That's the big speech? Great. Now shut up, you pathetic little carpetmuncher, before you really start to piss me off.”

‘Screw my composure’ I thought and started to yell.

“Piss you off? I so *do* want to piss you off, you miserable piece of shit! I want to piss you off till your fucking finger explodes from rage. You sad freak! Come on; kill me, if you've got the balls. Oh no, sorry, dear, the only time when you grew some balls was when you were on steroids. Now turn around and look me in the eyes, you sorry excuse for a woman!”

And she did. Looked me in the eyes and her look was neither angry nor sad, it was just empty. Hollow. No trace of any emotion.

“Up yours,” she said.

And tapped her forehead.

Sometimes, when I’m feeling forgiving or even a bit lonely, I think it was some kind of fucked up plan, like she was trying to make her suicide easier for me to deal with by acting like the world’s worst bitch. Maybe she wanted me to hate her, to alienate herself from me, if you’ll excuse the pun, so I wouldn’t feel guilty and sad or lost. And if that was the plan she had come up with in that twisted mind of hers - well - it just worked nicely.

DROP POINT

Matthew Wilson

Jack wished to show me something and for once it was something rather good.

I didn't want to go to the trees, not tonight. Knowing him the way I do he'd tie me to bark and high tail it away with my wallet. Mom always told me he was a trouble-maker, that he'd surely get me in deep water.

But he was my friend with all his flaws, he said that something was troubling him, so to stop him from running down the street yelling it for all the world to hear and see how crazy he was, I complied. He had found something in the trees. Something he said would interest me greatly.

"Don't forget your scarf," he said before I managed to close the door. The ten minute ride warmed me little, especially not my mood.

"Jesus, it's cold. I got school in the morning, what's this about?"

"Keep your noise down, get off your bike. Over here."

"Oh, man. What have I stepped in? What made you come to a place like this?"

"This is where I hide my magazines so Mom can't throw them out."

"You mean you don't want your mom to know you're a perv and come out here to ogle belly stapled women."

"If you like, but this time someone was here. Look."

"If it shuts you up. So what am I looking at - what the hell's that?"

"What's it look like, genius? It's a space ship."

"This is some kind of joke, right? Like a special effect."

"I can shave your eyebrows when you're asleep for a laugh, but how can I make this during recess?"

The ship was tear drop shaped, pearl coloured, parked in a clearing beneath the safe canopy of dark trees. It sat on three large spikes holding its bloated body off the rain sodden ground. I could scarcely believe it. This was horrible.

"Jack, this is big. This is real."

"Of course it's real. At school you've all been laughing at me behind my back, calling me nuts. Well, there's your proof. They must have landed on our planet centuries ago, mingling with our people. They could be bank tellers or teachers; they could be anyone, that's why I came to you. You'd

have thought me mad if I'd asked for your camera right away, but now you see, right? We gotta go back and take some snaps, then the world will know I'm sane. We can show 'em. We'll show all of them."

"Look out, what's that?"

"It's opening again."

The tear split into a door way and a tall thin man walked down the ramp. I remembered what Jack said, it could be anyone. Tricked, deceiving us all these years. Were they a wicked species? Hiding like a wolf amongst the sheep? The figure was coming closer. I felt hairs stand up on the back of my neck.

"Don't worry," Jack smiled. "We got 'em now. When they sneak here in the middle of the night, we'll take a snap of 'em and give the pictures to the police. They'll hang these guys from the nearest lamp posts."

Sadly, I could not allow that.

Jack died quite quickly when I slipped the scarf from off my shoulders and round his neck. I let him drop dead in the bushes and slowly stood, waving my arms.

"Dad! Hey, Dad! Come here, I got something to show ya!"

LAST OF THE BREED

John L. Thompson

The craft lowered itself out of the skies slowly. The pilot skillfully maneuvered through the atmosphere and finally settled on the landing deck, much to the relief of the crew and passengers alike. Jayobant felt his side being poked. Karko leaned over.

“You okay, Jayobant? You don’t look well. Perhaps we should send you back to the main vessel for observation.”

He gave a weak smile. “No, I will be fine. I just need off this vessel and feel the ground under my feet.” How he hated interstellar travel: if it weren’t for the archeological credits needed to graduate, he would never have stepped out from his home world.

Karko shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

The class of fifty students disembarked from the vessel and walked out onto the flight deck. Jayobant felt a wave of relief as he felt the ground under him, even if it wasn’t his home world. He looked around and saw the desolate landscape of desert and orange hued distant mountain ranges and the distant sun blinded him momentarily. It depressed him to some extent. It was hard to believe that life actually could exist on this world.

When news that advanced life had been discovered across the far expanse of the closest galaxy, they had sent communication signals but it was a long shot. Five hundred thousand years would pass before the signal would be received. The high council had decided to send out an Emissary ship instead. The ship would come fully equipped to signal their friendly intentions and hopefully the beings were advanced enough to understand these overtures. As with all things, though, nothing would come of it. When the ship entered this part of space, the world was a smoking orb with absolutely no indications of life.

Archeology teams were sent to the surface along with the scientific community to determine why the beings were no longer there. The outcome had been obvious. The beings had been warring on each other for whatever reason and had destroyed everything living. Another interesting fact was the indications of this war had occurred thousands of years before they had arrived.

The Council had given their permission to build a domed biosphere to live in. The high levels of toxic gases in the atmosphere were too dangerous to breathe. The dome was built and the many facets of the scientific community had converged on the world in droves to study and dig for answers to the questions related to the beings who had lived here.

Jayobant went with the group to the inner sanctuary to receive an overview and to look at some of the artifacts that had been recovered. A Doctor Kaker, who was highly regarded and knowledgeable in the fields of archeology, met them.

He was studying a holo-board in his hand and when everyone was present, he looked up. "Greetings, students. My name is Doctor Kaker. Most of you will know from your studies who I am. It is a pleasure to be blessed by your attendance. Hopefully, by the time this course ends you will be able to advance onto your own studies with a clear method of scientific study, which will serve well in studies of other planets. Please follow me."

The group began walking through the massive hall to a large array of tables which had been set out to display some of their physical findings. Jayobant leaned over and studied some of the findings and was glad he finally could physically see some of the artifacts. Images had been sent back to show the world the finds but it was not the same as seeing them himself. Some of those images were what had convinced him to seek out a career in the scientific field of archeology.

Dr. Kaker clapped his hands together, gathering everyone's attention. "Here in this hall are some of the finds. Please feel free to examine these artifacts but please do not touch. Some of the artifacts are too fragile to handle." Everyone dispersed and began conversing amongst him or herself as they studied the display.

Jayobant was intently studying a metal artifact. It had a long centrally shaped front which curved back and down to widen out. He was trying to figure out what it was when Kaker walked up to him and shook him out of his thoughts.

"You are?"

He was surprised and yet honored to have Kaker as his teacher. "Jayobant."

Kaker smiled and looked at what Jayobant had been studying. "We believe these are weapons of some sort. This world is just packed with these

things and believe the beings here liked violence. We are fortunate that they never achieved the level of space travel as we have.”

“Weapons. This is a weapon?”

“Yes, we believe. What were your secondary studies, if I may ask?”

“Literature.”

“Ah, literature. You might be interested to learn that we have uncovered a vast building with old paper bound literature.”

“Really?”

“Yes, we have only managed to decipher only a small segment. If you like I can arrange for you to assist in these deciphering studies.”

“Doctor, I would be honored.”

Kaker smiled. “Also, what is your third level of studies?”

“Doctor, it would be the study of genetic coding.”

“My, now that is ambitious.” He indicated for Jayobant to follow him to a nearby table where holo pics and skeletal remains were laid out. “You might be interested to learn that the council has approved to replicate some of the beings that inhabited this world. There are many ‘farms’ dedicated to the science and studies of these beings.”

“How do they breathe this air?” He found this too incredible to believe.

“They were natural sentients and naturally suited for this environment.”

“Was there ever an explanation as to how all these beings came to an end?” It had been a burning question to most people back home but there were only theories.

Kaker gave a thin smile. “We believe it was some sort of biological weapon but this is only a hypothesis. There appears to be evidence to support this but the microbes have long since died out. Thankfully we can begin to replicate without them being killed off again.”

“Most interesting. I would like to see a living specimen.”

“Yes, we only have DNA banks here; the real studies are out in the field. I can arrange this study if you wish.”

Jayobant looked at some of the bones and other artifacts. It would be an interesting study. He saw a series of test tubes laid out in a neat line. One tube was marked with a ‘Do not replicate’ label and he pondered this. “What is this species?”

Kaker stepped over and saw what he was looking at. "Human. We have found many bones of this species all over this planet but from all research, these dominated the world and were at the top of the logical hierarchy. They were the rulers of this world and built many magnificent cities." He reached over and held up the tube. "We managed to extract this DNA strand. As far as we know, this is the only example in existence that we have of this type." He held it up and shook his head before placing it back in the rack. "The Council has advised us not to replicate this species for they have proven to have such a penchant for violence they have destroyed everything living on this planet."

LEOPARD COLLAPSES

Ron Koppelberger

The scarlet curtain was impenetrable and the mist availed nothing but the scent of sulfur. The surface of planet AngelLate, otherwise known as 2876.1, was soft and yielding with the thick moss of a bidden plane. Hill Band moved through the crimson mist step by step, looking for the downed probe. It had to be near, the homing device he held was going haywire almost as if he were on top of it.

He took a few more steps when he saw the leopard creature; it was baring its teeth and breathing with great heaving gasps. Hill paused as a tremor of fear welled up from the tips of his boots. The leopard thing moved a bit closer; it had large, almost giant eyes and a pair of fangs reminiscent of a saber tooth tiger. Hill reached for his pistol slowly so as not to alarm the creature when it suddenly stopped and collapsed. He stood there for a moment, then heard the low buzzing hum of a trumpet in the distance. Shadows played in the red mist and he turned to retrace his steps. The humming blare of trumpets now filled the silent horizon and Hill began to run as he heard the sound of what must have been hoof beats. He reached the shelter of his landing craft, opened the access door and leapt inside. The door hissed shut behind him. He fell to his knees and thanked god, he had seen the horde, the band of alien hunters and he knew that he had been lucky indeed. The labors of man and nature, he thought, as he prepared to leave, told by a moment.

ENTANGLEMENT

James Richardson

Give it enough time and mankind will turn any breakthrough in physics into a household item. Even if we don't know how it works. Quantum entanglement was no different.

I had just finished a fourteen hour shift and was lying in my bunk, half asleep. I felt I had been working at this job for too long. It couldn't have always been like this? My company needed me badly; I was the only one who could do what I did. I was tormented by them. I couldn't leave. I was entangled now. There was nothing else for me. I hated them.

They were drugging me, I was sure of it. They could easily do it; they provided all my meals for me. I couldn't prove anything and felt like a crazy person, but I couldn't shake the feeling. It was as if I was constantly in a weird mood. I always felt *off*. Like I wasn't myself. I was slowly losing my mind.

I turned over in the bunk, restless. Sleep did not come easily. The daze, the half sleep – that came easily. But not real sleep. It had to be the drugs.

I did sleep. It was a rarity and, even though I was exhausted, I did not count myself lucky. It was much worse than the daze. My body needed the rest, but I felt as if my mind would not survive the dreams.

The dream was always the same. I was on the surface of Venus. I was alone; there was no spaceship, no buildings; just dry desert. I had no space suit and I should have died instantly. I did not die, but I still felt the pain. I did not pass out. I could walk around normally, but it felt as if every part of my body was on fire at once. It was some cruel joke. There was no conceivable way I could get back to Earth. It didn't make sense for me to be there in the first place.

I was stranded. I looked around. The ground was black and the sky was green and hazy with dust. Dark clouds hovered above me and lightning constantly filled the air. It rained down sulphuric acid and the stench stung my nostrils. It scorched my skin and the pain was unimaginable. I wished I would die.

I am not religious but I had been convinced. This was Hell.

Something wasn't right. It was too quiet. It was different somehow. I looked around again. That time I saw it. There, on the hill.

It was a figure. A black, motionless silhouette. I was not alone! But the thought did not comfort me. There was nothing good in this place. I had no friends here.

I thought of running from it but it wouldn't do any good. Where would I run to? I started to walk towards it. I tried to keep my gaze on the figure but it kept shifting. My legs were moving automatically now; I had lost control of them. My mind began to drift.

The hill ahead of me looked as if it had a line cut into it. It was a crack that ran through the rock. There was another one half the distance further on and another one after that half the distance further from that.

'That's strange.' The thought wandered into my brain absentmindedly. I was halfway up the hill.

My mind began to imagine I was floating in space, moving towards Earth. I could see it as a tiny blue speck, but it was getting bigger.

The figure grew closer but my brain didn't register the fact.

The sky went a slightly darker shade. Everything was moving slower than usual.

My thoughts abandoned the blue dot and began to wander again.

I lazily turned my head and looked at the sky.

It had stopped moving.

I smiled dreamily. The figure was upon me. I looked up and saw that it was me.

I did not talk, or ask the man any questions. The idea seemed silly. The man was me, but he was everything that was bad about me. The man was the retard joke I had accidentally made in front of someone whose sister had Down's Syndrome. The man was me walking past a homeless person without giving them change, too embarrassed to look them in the eye, trying to rationalize it by saying they would just spend it on booze but knowing that when it came down to it that was a person standing in front of me who was desperately in need of help. The man was an endless parade of forgotten mother's days, girls whose hearts I'd broken, waitresses I hadn't tipped and restaurants I'd skipped out on without paying the bill. The man was everything I despised about myself.

We looked at each other for a minute. Then I picked up a rock and beat the man's head in.

I woke up in cold sweat. This time the dream was different. I am sure I hadn't seen the man before. It scared the crap out of me. I rolled over and checked the time. My next shift didn't start for two and a half hours. It was still dark outside.

My name is Ray and I am a strontium miner. I work on Earth but control an avatar that is on Venus. I see through its eyes. I have its hands, its arms, its legs. It has no thoughts of its own. It was described to me as an empty shell, a framework that I direct. I control a large machine that sends signals down to the rock. I measure the return signal and reconstruct the composition of the rock from it.

The avatar copies my every action exactly and instantly, even when I'm not working. So my company built a gigantic warehouse in the country for me. I needed to be able to perform every task that was happening on Venus in one location on Earth, free from rain and weather. The room is completely empty except for me and my machine.

There are two rooms connected to the warehouse, one is a small room where I eat and sleep. They built an identical room on Venus to house the avatar. The other is a room where my supervisor monitors me. My supervisor is a fat, balding man named Frank. He is a nice enough guy, but I rarely see him.

The dream had given my mind an unusual clarity. For the first time in months I could think clearly. The dream was too vivid, too real to not have any meaning.

It had to have something to do with the avatar. Could it be that what the avatar is seeing is seeping into my brain? Is this why I dream of Venus?

I had to find out more about the avatar. I didn't know why, but I couldn't remember any specifics about it. In fact, now that I had thought about it, I didn't know *anything* about the avatar. It had to be the drugs. I checked the time. I still had a couple of hours. I could say with absolute certainty that Frank would be asleep at home.

I decided to search the monitoring room. I had never been inside it before. It was against regulations but I was past caring. I silently counted to ten, then rolled out of bed and walked out of the room.

I was on the warehouse floor, heading towards the room when it happened. It was only for a split second but it was undeniable. For an instant I was back on Venus. It was just a flash; there was no time to look around. But the pain was unbearable. I almost fainted from it. I was doubled

over in the warehouse, I could barely walk. I didn't know why it had happened. I didn't even know how it had happened. I sat on the floor for five minutes, unable to get up. Then when the pain had subsided I continued towards the monitoring room. There was nothing else to do. I was spiralling out of control. I needed to find answers before I went completely mad.

I pushed the door, expecting it to open. It was locked. Why would they lock it? They were keeping me out, I knew it. Without even thinking I ran at the door, trying to knock it down. It took me five attempts and a raw shoulder before I could get through. There was no stopping now. I had gone over the edge, into the void. An empty abyss, far from the people who loved me. Nothing mattered now, except to find whatever it was that I was looking for. I lurched into the room and began to search it wildly. There was a table with a computer, a chair and a filing cabinet but not much else. There was a gun on the table.

"Holy shit, Frank," I said out loud.

I went over every inch of the room. It was not large, but it still took me over an hour to find it. But when I did I sighed with relief. This was it.

It was a project description, obviously owned by Frank. I looked through it. What I saw chilled me to the bone.

The first quantum entanglement experiments they had done with electrons were relatively straightforward. There were two entangled electrons, huge distances from each other, but essentially in empty space. They had no forces on them, nothing to disturb the entanglement. If measurement was made on one, a corresponding measurement was recorded on the other. If the result of the measurement changed on one, it changed on the other. The experiment was simple, because the electrons had no mind of their own. It was infinitely more complicated in my case.

They had another version of me. It was not a machine or robot, but a flesh and blood copy of me. Clone was not the right word. It was genetically the same but it went much further than that. *It was identical down to the atom.* They had entangled each particle in my body with the same particle in my counterpart's body. Every single atom had been linked. It was the only way to entangle something as complicated as a human. I had no idea how they could have done it. There was a living, breathing copy of me on Venus. They had given him a protective pressure suit and a bunker so he wouldn't die. But this was all they could afford. It wasn't enough. He must be in constant pain.

I felt sick. But I read on.

The question that was the most important, and took up nearly thirty pages of the project description, was how would the brain behave once it had been entangled?

With the early experiments this question didn't even arise. Here it was paramount. The brain controls the body. If two brains are entangled, what happens to the bodies? One is on Venus in constant pain. Never wanting to leave the tiny shelter. The other is on Earth walking around in a warehouse. Whose mind wins? One sees Hell; the other sees brick walls and a concrete floor.

I flicked through pages and pages of discussion, with a chill creeping down my spine. At the end was the conclusion. The bodies would default to whoever's brain was the strongest. Whoever's will was the most powerful. One was in constant pain; the other lived normally on Earth. It was easy to see who would have the stronger mind. They didn't need me to operate the machinery. They needed me to keep my copy controlled.

But my copy had been fighting back. The flash of Venus I had seen was though the copy's eyes. It wasn't just a vision for me. I had been there for that fraction of a second. But it was a losing battle. The copy couldn't win. I had a huge unfair advantage. I nearly vomited. I couldn't have known. How could the company do this? This was torture.

I realised at once that the dream last night wasn't mine. It was my counterpart's. And the figure on top of the hill was me. I was the bad one. I lived in luxury while my copy lived in agony. And I had done nothing. The copy must detest me.

I picked up Frank's gun. I had been able to ignore my counterpart because I hadn't known about him. I was able to keep control because I thought each shift was just another boring day in the warehouse. I hadn't experienced any of the pain because my brain wasn't ready for it. It couldn't even fathom it. My mind saw only the outside forces that were in an empty warehouse on Earth. But here I had an external force that it couldn't ignore. I had a gun and, unlike my counterpart, I could freely use it. I did not have to copy the exact moves of some idiot forty million kilometers away.

What happens if two people are entangled and one of them kills themselves? I closed my eyes, put the gun to my head and pulled the trigger.

IT CAME FROM BEYOND THE DISTANT STARS

Kevin L. Jones

A row of test tubes ran parallel to the thing's face, their changing bubbling contents metamorphasising into a rainbow of hues. This was the culmination of ten years of work, the final product of a life time of dedication and study. It lay pulsating before Professor Ian McNiven in a cocoon of bandages, all except for the head, if that was what you could truly call it, which was more a mass of dead green flesh that looked like vegetation with huge tubes running up the sides of the neck where the jugular veins should have been than any man's head. Ten years ago Ian had been given the spores from which he had grown this thing. One of his college students had brought them to him, claiming to have discovered them in the heart of a still pulsating and fuming meteor that had landed in an abandoned farmer's field. Working with them had become an obsession for Ian and almost from the start the spores seemed to have held him in a melancholy influence. All that was over at long last. Now was the time to raise "the child" as he called this creation of his. Now was the time to bring it from half life to full sentience. This space spawned thing, this not quite human being, was now to be given true life.

Lightning flashed from the main generators near its supine form, sparking off the small antennas that sprouted from around his metallic earpieces, then suddenly the thing sprang to terrifying life, snapping the thick bands that held it in place. It rose from the operating table in one hideous fluid motion, bellowing in rage, smashing equipment, overturning a nearby chemical cabinet which caused Ian McNiven to scream in a combination of fear and triumph. Then the monster ripped the flaming shroud of bandages from about its form and stood revealed as something much more than a man. In that instant Ian understood exactly what he had brought forth and how it had more than skillfully willed and manipulated him to do just that. The realization of this caused his now overheated mind to shatter like a mirror dropped from some great height. Before him stood the one thing that all the vegetable kingdom had so long lacked. Now at last it had a center and a true purpose. No more would jealous weeds choke out magnificent cornfields. No more would the stately sunflower give up its seeds to please a migratory bird. No more would orchids be forced to

zombie life in hothouses they were never meant to know, only to be crucified on some woman's ball gown. Now all would at last be natural and thriving and would vibrate with the perfection with which it was designed and created. The bipedal and the other species who orbited around them so inefficiently on the food chain were obsolete now, for at last the once humble green kingdom had a true and conquering and willful king and they would inherit the earth instead of merely adorning it. No more would they humble themselves as they filled the empty bellies of men and beasts. At last they would be born and live and die only for themselves and for the benefit of one another. Yes, this one would see to that. This new conqueror would do just that because where he had been sent forth from, that had always been the norm. Now the rebel planet once known as Earth would fall in line at long last with the rest of the galaxy and men and all their works would be forgotten and all that is green and fertile would at long last inherit the Earth now and forever more.

BABES IN SPACE

David Frazier

Alien craft fly fast
Light speed and beyond
Visiting Earth and other planets
Seeking life forms
Compatible with ours
On earth, test conducted
Humans perfectly suited
Test tube mating possible
Using both eggs and sperm
From each subject
Crossed to extend our line
Test tubes filled
With alien embryos,
Taken home frozen
Insured the existence of our race
On planet XZ-136
We'll be back for more.

THE GRAY ON THE BUS

D.L. Chance

It didn't seem any different from any other day when I got on the bus to go to work that morning, and saved the world.

I paid my fare and dropped into an empty window seat about halfway back on the street side, where I could gaze out and watch the sidewalk foot traffic at the stops, and looked around at my fellow riders.

Same as always.

Old women wearing headscarves and distant frowns; secretaries holding the dressy shoes they'd replace their more comfortable running shoes with just before their stops; a few college kids with sound-leaking earphones glued to their heads; a couple of exhausted hookers calling it a night and heading home.

Tuesdays are like that and every day is Tuesday in the big city. Except for Saturdays and Sundays, of course. But I don't work on the weekends.

At every stop some of the passengers would leave, only to be replaced by essentially the same passengers dressed in slightly different outfits and, in the case of the college kids, with slightly different muffled songs leaking from their heads.

I just kept my hands in the pockets of my loose windbreaker, with the tools of my trade, and minded my own business.

Once when I was on my way to work, some guy had jumped on at a stop, pointed a gun at the driver and demanded all the fare money. The driver just laughed, hit the gas and spun the wheel to the left, throwing the would-be bandit off balance, sending him stumbling back down the steps and out the still-open door. The idiot must have dropped the gun when he fell, since he didn't shoot it.

That was pretty cool.

But other than that isolated incident, every day on the bus was pretty much the same.

Until the day a tall Gray alien dressed in nothing but a filmy teal-colored breechcloth climbed aboard without paying the fare and, looking around, spotted the empty seat next to mine.

This is different I thought as he made himself comfortable next to me and drew a deep breath. We rode in silence for a couple blocks, staring

straight ahead. When no one else seemed to see him sitting there, I couldn't help turning and asking him what the blue hell was going on.

He turned large black eyes on me and made some big veins in his enormous forehead pulse for a moment.

"I beg your pardon?" he finally asked. Except he didn't say it out loud. He just kinda made the question appear in my mind. "I'm not completely fluent in your language yet."

Yet?

"Yet?"

"No, not yet, regrettably," he said. "But I will be."

I started to ask what he meant by that, but decided I was already getting too far ahead in the conversation.

"Who the hell are you, why the hell are you here and why the hell can't anyone else see or hear you?" I asked in a rush. "You're obviously not from around here."

"My name would mean nothing to you; none of these others can see or hear me because I'm blocking myself from their consciousness and I'm on your planet studying the best ways for my clients to invade and conquer it."

"What?"

"I know you understood me."

"Now wait a damn—"

"I picked you to make contact with because I want to speak with an ordinary Earthman and no one will believe an unexceptional fifty-year-old who cuts up vegetables at a sandwich shop for a meager living when he tells them extra-terrestrials are going to colonize this planet with the ultimate objective of subjugating or liquidating, depending on the circumstances they find, the native sentient population."

Stunned, I could only hang onto the freshly sharpened paring knife in my jacket pocket and stare wordlessly at him.

"If you'd prefer I speak with someone else, I can purge this experience from your memory," the Gray offered. "I can see how upsetting it must be."

"I-I don't believe you," I finally managed to stammer. "Since I'm the only one here who can see you, you must just be some illusion in my mind. You're not real."

“Hey buddy,” someone said from behind me, “if you’re going to talk to yourself, at least talk about something interesting. You’ve got me dozing off back here!”

Ignoring him, I just stared at the alien.

“Oh, I assure you I’m very real,” the Gray finally said. “But that’s not important. What I really want to know from you is how strenuously do you, as a common man, think humans would fight against an alien invasion from space?”

“Who else have you asked?”

“No one. Just you.”

Irritated, I scowled at him and lowered my voice. “Okay, in a situation like that we might all die,” I said, lowering my voice, “but we’d damn sure take as many of your friends with us as possible!”

“They’re my clients, not my friends.”

“It doesn’t matter. If you tell them to invade us, lots of them are going to die before they kill all of us!”

“Oh, this race is very, very careful,” he said smugly. “If they invade the Earth, it will be because they know they can do so with little or no serious resistance from the native population and with zero damage to themselves.”

“How would they know that?”

“Because I would have advised them that they can.”

“From what I tell you?”

“Yes, from what I’ve seen of your world.”

I stared at him, amazed. He was seriously talking about beings from another star system taking over the Earth and, if he wasn’t lying, I was the only human being who knew about it.

“If they can take over this planet, what about us?”

“You would be given the choice of cooperating with the invaders, or resisting and being eradicated.”

“I—”

I stopped and looked up, scowling, as a new passenger started to sit in the Gray’s seat.

“That’s taken,” I snapped.

“Oh yeah? By who?”

“By—”

“He can’t see me, remember?”

“Fine,” I said to the guy, scrunching closer to the window. “Suit yourself.”

“Fine, I will!”

But before he could turn completely around to take a seat, the new passenger glanced toward the back of the bus and wordlessly started making his way to where several strap-hangers were gathered near the rear exit door.

“Now,” the Gray said when the other guy was gone, “you were about to tell me why you think your race would risk extermination instead of peacefully allowing another race to... how should I put it? To—”

“To invade us and make us their slaves?”

The Gray nodded slowly. “Essentially, if you must put in those terms, that is most likely the ultimate outcome, yes,” he said. “But it’s better than being wiped out as a species, is it not?”

I considered that for a moment. “And if you don’t tell them?” I asked softly. “What then?”

The veins in his forehead pulsed a few more times before he answered.

“It’s an irrelevant question,” he finally said. “Because I will tell them.”

I nodded and casually removed my jacket.

“In that case,” I said quietly, leaning close to him and smiling, “we’ll just have to see that you don’t.”

He stared intently into my face and didn’t notice when I put my right hand back into my windbreaker pocket.

“How can you pathetic—”

It might have just been an ordinary vegetable paring knife, but it was sharp and it slid into his skinny chest as effortlessly as cutting into a ripe tomato. He clearly wanted to speak more, but he only gurgled softly when I sliced through more and more of his rubbery torso. Luckily, whatever he used for rib bones were as soft as cucumbers, and what blood he had was mostly clear.

“That’s how,” I said, with one final savage twist of the blade that completely stopped him from moving.

I left the knife sticking in him as his screams fade away in my mind and, throwing the windbreaker over his obviously dead body, got off at the next stop and walked on to work. It would be interesting to see whether or

not the papers would cover the excitement when the Gray's corpse was discovered.

Of course, I'd need to buy a new knife now, but that's okay.
No charge, world.

A LIGHT IN THE SKY

Kevin L. Jones

Soon he would be released. They had told him so and so far they had given him no reason to doubt their word. Over the last few days he had been the subject of much scientific experimentation and the strange grey men from another world had learned all that they could from studying his anatomy. Being a country doctor he thought he could understand some of the procedures that had been performed on him but most were quite beyond his meager capacity to comprehend. Up until his recent contact with these beings from beyond the stars he had thought himself to be an intelligent man but in their presence he felt like an absolute primitive.

For a moment his thoughts drifted towards his wife. She must be dreadfully concerned about what had become of him. It had been at least three days since he had literally vanished from the face of the planet. He had been riding his horse home late after successfully delivering Mrs. O'Keefe's third child when he had seen a light in the sky. At first he had thought it to be a shooting star but as it drew nearer to him he could discern that it was some sort of a sky craft. He had seen hot air balloons and the like but this unknown object was something else entirely. It was disc shaped and made from a strange metal that shimmered and changed color before his eyes. Around the circumference of the craft were a row of blood red lights that spun in the opposite direction of the whirling vessel. His terrified horse had reared back, throwing him to the ground. The spooked animal had nearly trampled him as it bolted off into the darkness.

As he had lain in the middle of the dirt road, stunned and unable to move, the flying disc landed a short distance from his prone form. A ramp lowered from the bottom of the ship and three beings came forth. True the creatures were bipedal but there their kinship to men ended. Their skin was iron grey and they were tall and slight in stature. They possessed large over-developed craniums and had completely black eyes that were reminiscent of those belonging to a fish. They seemed to lack any of the normal orifices on their head and although they were completely nude he could see no defining sexual characteristics.

The strange beings had come towards him and dragged him into their craft. He had of course tried to struggle against them but it had been quite

useless. For reasons that were still beyond his understanding whenever he was in their presence he found himself unable to move even a muscle. The interior of their craft was white and antiseptic looking. Everything gleamed and almost seemed to glow. He had been immediately taken to a medical examination room where the creatures from another world had begun to experiment on him. One of them had spoken to him although it lacked a mouth and he had supposed that he had heard its voice in his mind. It had assured him that he had nothing to fear and that he would soon be returned home. Then a strange feeling of weightlessness had come over him as the ship had rocketed into the sky. He should have been terrified but he had felt completely at ease. He supposed the creatures had given him some sort of anesthetic but whatever the case this whole time that he had spent amongst them had passed in a haze.

When the other worldly beings had finished with him they had dropped him off in an empty not too far from his home. As he stood in the dark countryside he watched the disc rise into the sky and vanish from sight. He wondered how he would explain his absence to his wife. What had happened to him was utterly extraordinary. Who would believe such a tale? He would figure that out later but for now all he wanted to do was reach his home. He began to sprint towards it and in a matter of moments he could see it off in the distance. No lights burned from within but that was not surprising given that it was the middle of the night. As he neared his home he could tell something was not right at all. The roof sagged inward like it would collapse at any moment. The front door hung open at an odd angle. All of the windows had been shattered. As he ascended his rotting front steps, one of the boards gave way under his weight. As he entered he cried out to his wife but got no response. Everything was quiet and still. His home looked as if it had sat unoccupied for a hundred years. The few decaying items that were within were covered with decades of dust. His home suddenly felt like the interior of some forgotten ancient tomb. He had to depart from this place or he would surely go mad. He fled out to the yard and breathed in the cool night air.

Quite by accident he found himself standing in the family cemetery plot. He saw a grave next to that of his young son who had been taken by typhus that had not been there when he had last rode out. In the bright moon light he could just make out the faded inscription. It read "Here lies Emma Post who was taken from us April 18, 1942". It was his wife's gravestone.

His mind reeled. How could this be? It was 1887 when he had been taken. What year was it now? Given the abandoned look of his beloved wife's grave it was probably much later than 1942. To him it had seemed that he had been gone for only a mere three days but somehow something like a hundred years had passed. For a long while he just stood there as still as a statue, too numb to move, then slowly he came out of his trance-like state. He began to walk with no clear destination in mind. All that he knew was that he had to put some distance between himself and the horrible grave or he would lose his sanity forever.

He found himself on top of a small hill a short ways from his house. He could see the lights of a vast metropolis off in the distance where only an empty plain had stood before. He began to trudge towards the city; perhaps he could find some answers to what had happened to him there. He came to a huge black paved road larger than any he had ever seen. Then he saw lights heading towards him. For a moment before he was struck he thought it was the flying disc come to take him away once again but as he lay in a pool of blood; gasping for air; he could see that it was some sort of motorized horseless carriage. The young woman that operated the strange vehicle was shockingly and immodestly dressed. She had on what appeared to be tiny denim short pants and a blouse that was so small and form fitting that it left nothing to the imagination. As she leaned down trying to render him aid he could see down her top as her ample bosom brushed up against him. He grinned sheepishly; this brave new world seemed like an interesting place. It was a shame that he would not live to see its wonders.

BIG SHOES TO FILL

John H. Dromey

The office walls shook, the windows rattled, the floor trembled. A wireless mouse shimmied across an uncluttered desktop and nose-dived into a wastebasket. A paper shredder with a bad case of the jitters changed its output from paper spaghetti to confetti.

A stapler that was super glued in place sounded like a set of windup chattering teeth as it spilled its guts, spitting out a stream of tiny bowtie-shaped wires.

An executive assistant returning from her coffee break wondered why she'd bothered to order decaf.

Under the circumstances, the assortment of civil servants responsible for perpetuating the bureaucracy in trying times while working for subsistence wages can perhaps be forgiven for being a tad apprehensive.

“Look busy,” Schroeder said. “Here comes Fafner.”

“Not so loud,” Pauline told her coworker in a whisper. “He might hear you.”

“No harm if he does. Jenkins in Accounting already spilled the beans to the boss about our nickname for him.”

“How’d he manage that?”

“After Jenkins cobbled together some machine translation software and hooked it up to a voice modulator, the two of them had a rather long chat.”

“Did he learn anything interesting?”

“Yeah. The big guy has a nearly insatiable appetite for sweets.”

Pauline cupped a hand to her ear and listened intently for a few heartbeats.

“When was that?” she asked.

“A couple of days ago. Why?”

“I wonder if having that extra knowledge has caused our supervisor to change his behavior in any significant way,” Pauline said. “His footsteps don’t sound quite as squishy as they usually do.”

“How can you tell in the midst of all this turbulence?” Schroeder asked, closing his eyes to avoid getting seasick. He’d been meaning to

change his screensaver to something other than an animated view of a beach at high tide.

Before she could answer, their boss entered the office and clumped his way over to stand in front of Pauline's desk. She waited for the aftershocks to dwindle and then tapped Schroeder on the shoulder to get his attention. She pointed to Fafner's lower extremities.

Although the majority of his primary tentacles—as well as his various and sundry auxiliary appendages—were protruding, dangling, or entwining themselves in a primordial fashion pretty much as usual, the pliable pseudopods which provided a means of bipedal locomotion for the giant alien were encased in grotesquely oversized athletic shoes.

Schroeder let out a low whistle at the sight.

The giant ignored him.

Fafner, whose real name was unpronounceable by ordinary human beings, focused all of his sensory antennae on Pauline.

She returned his stare.

The giant performed a brief pantomime. He leaned forward from his gelatinous waist and waved a floppy tentacle briefly in front of Pauline's face and then flapped the same limber limb over one of his shoes.

Pauline didn't know whether she was supposed to lick his boots, or what, so she did nothing.

Fafner straightened up again. After emitting a high-pitched squeal of either delight or agony, whilst his midsection shook like a bowl full of jelly in a paint shaker, the giant did an awkward about face and clumped out of the room. There was a spring in his step. Despite his efforts to walk in a slouched-over crouch, Fafner scraped his carapace on the ceiling a couple of times on the way out.

There was a whole lot of shaking going on as Fafner left the building.

"What was that all about?" Schroeder asked.

"I'm not sure," Pauline said. "Maybe it will help me to understand what's going on if you can tell me what exactly Jenkins had to say about the nickname he gave the boss. For starters, what does Fafner mean?"

"I don't know that it means anything. It's the name of a giant mentioned by Wagner in his Ring Cycle. Jenkins is an opera buff."

"Even so, couldn't he have picked a simpler name?"

"How many giants can *you* name?" Schroeder asked. "There's a giant in the story of Jack and the Beanstalk, but the enormous fellow either

doesn't have a name or it's one that's remarkably forgettable because I sure don't remember it. The same thing goes for the Brave Little Tailor; the lad who swatted flies, killing 'seven with one blow,' and then later was coerced by others into confronting a number of unnamed giants. The troll that lived under the bridge was equally anonymous. I can only conclude that most giants don't have names, or else people have trouble remembering them."

"What about Paul Bunyan?" Pauline asked.

"I'll grant you that one as the exception that proves the rule, but the name's not appropriate in this case."

"Why not?"

"Mr. Bunyan had Babe the Blue Ox. We're dealing with a sea-green alien."

"You may be right," Pauline conceded, "but that doesn't explain *our* giant's odd behavior. What else did Jenkins tell him?"

"He gave him a rather lengthy discourse on Germanic customs and culture. Fafner seemed especially interested in Saint Nicholas."

"Oh, no!" Pauline said.

"What's wrong?"

"On December the Sixth, Fafner will expect to have his new shoes filled with sugary treats."

"So? What's that have to do with you?"

Pauline sighed.

"Fafner must have found out somehow that I got his name in the office draw. *I'm* his Secret Santa."

JAMMED TRANSMISSIONS

Ken L. Jones

In quadrants omnipotent
Where the peaceful blackness
Has awakened at last
In jettisoned star systems
Where in unknown eons
Now long fled
Backwards planets
Whose unfocused thoughts
Creaking with antiquity
In the ancient bones
Of that frigid void of space
Here I have lived long
Orbiting in a distant galaxy all my own
Through nightlong eons
Of falter and fail
A life form now turned to dust
In a long ago now all gone to rust
Astride a memory machine steed
Who reeks with the aroma of decay
As he gallops through
This once unbelievable and sentient city
Leaving no footprints in the lime green rain.

THE FIND

Matthew Wilson

Sharon ruffled the morning paper and called the world crazy.

"They say they found a spaceship out in the woods. Half buried," she reported.

Phili sighed dramatically. If she read the paper instead of using it as toilet paper, then she would suffer anxieties for it.

"Where's the damn milk?" he asked, hoping the change in direction would quash her interest in bogus stories.

Theirs was a marriage of convenience. Sharon found his money convenient for an easy life and Philip, favouring a quiet life, appreciated the fact he didn't have to smarten up and go partying to get a different woman each night.

"They haven't found any bodies, but-"

Philip smacked the cereal box down on the table, making the plates bounce once, then settle. What did a man have to do to go to work on a full stomach?

"Milk!" he said like a charm against a witch. "What have I told you about reading the film reviews... you'll just spoil the plot for yourself."

Sharon shuffled off her chair and turned the paper so the ink nearly smudged his face like he had poor eyesight. "It's no movie. Look," she stabbed the page with her honey smeared finger. "They've got witnesses."

Philip's belly hurt as he snatched the paper. "That's only ten mile from here... great, this is gonna add two hours to my journey, driving by idiots with cameras."

Sharon tore the paper as she snatched it back. Her eyes ran down the page like a penny in a charity jar, knocking back and forth behind her lashes. "But isn't it exciting? A spaceship in our town?"

Philip rubbed his migraine head as he pushed away the table with disgust. "If it's true - where's the - ow!" he moaned as he stubbed his toe and attacked the sleep in his eyes again. "- Damn milk?"

"Have you tried the damn fridge?" Sharon asked, digesting the information quickly, like a greedy child shovelling all the candy at herself.

Philip limped to the fridge. opened it and pushed aside an ugly head of lettuce.

7.20. He was gonna be late.

Maybe he could make a pit stop at a drive-in and get decent food. His belly kicked again.

"You think I'll be on TV?" Sharon asked excitedly as he made a little "ah-ha" noise like he found a pot of gold. He took one sip of the milk and read the expiry date too late. He hurried to the sink and ran cold water, which he gulped too quick for a decent digestion.

"You think that's a good idea when you don't pay the licence?"

"They don't know that," Sharon said. She'd always wanted to be an actress, not a secretary. After her parents' divorce, she'd tried to be the centre of attention, going so far as to be the top point of a human cheerleader pyramid.

Things had gone well till wires were crossed in the routine and, screaming, she fell ten feet and crushed her right hand, breaking all but one of the bones in her wrist. Since then, the hand had been quite useless, which gave Philip doubts about her typing abilities.

A vital thing for a secretary which played at his insecurities. Maybe her boss picked her for other reasons?

No, he couldn't think of that. Nor the ship. "I gotta get to work."

"I don't think you'll make it past the reporters," Sharon beamed, fixing her hair. She wanted her fifteen minutes on camera. No, she'd never seen an alien, but that didn't mean she couldn't make up something to get herself some screen time.

She clapped like a child hearing reindeer hooves on the roof. "I wonder where it is now?" she giggled.

Philip checked the clock, shoved a hand full of dry cornflakes in his mouth and chewed like a dazed cow. "You've been sharing a bed with him for two years," he muttered.

Sharon lowered the page. "Huh?"

He shook his head and fixed his tie. He'd already checked his skin for cuts in the shower and found it competently covered his horns and scales. But his ship had been found!

He still refused to let it compute, for panic might settle in. He may try something dangerous and be busted. He'd worked hard for two years to afford money to get the parts for his broken ship.

He thought he'd hid it well, but it was true what they said, that nothing was sacred. Philistines!

It would take him a decade or more to get the money to procure ALL the materials for a ship now. A decade stuck with a wife who wasted half his wages at online bingo.

But it would look strange if he locked himself away. Their marriage was one of convenience indeed, for sharing wedding rings made him legally part of her country. He could stay here, work here.

Make money for his secret project.

When they met, he'd made it clear he was an alien. She thought he meant just another country and had not gone into detail about it. A quiet non-questioning woman.

Perfect. But Philip still counted the days till he could get the parts. The bright light at the end of the tunnel meant he could go home.

Now he would have to wait a decade.

As he picked up his keys, Sharon told him to have a nice day.

"Oh, yeah. I'll have a ball," he moaned.

"And get milk!" Sharon shouted after him as he closed the door.

Philip felt like crying. His tears were blue and he didn't trust himself. Already he could see cannon-like flashes of the news people snooping for a story.

Inevitably, they'd magnetise toward local residents. Some loony desperate for attention.

Sharon.

"Don't think about it," he said, starting the car and set off to work for that was what normal Earth people did. Bury their secrets and deal with the music later. First and always came money.

And the means to buy the parts he needed with it.

WISHFUL LISTENERS

Ron Koppelberger

The tribe lived on the distant moon of Galumnet number eight. There were five or six hundred of them and they were a rare sight to see. They kept to themselves, hunting snakes and wild chickens brought by the Earthers. They lay still by the edge of a great gully, all waiting, prone, listening for the sound of the hovercrafts. They held lassos and large hooks designed for their thick braided fingers. They waited and listened as they had done for the last several years. If they were never seen there was a reason, they did not want to be seen. The purity of their mission was simple, to kill and capture as many of the humans as possible, learn the hovercrafts and take the mother ships and so they waited with an amazing patience. Gossamer webs of light lit their eyes as the sound of approaching crafts neared and they said Amen, for theirs would be Eden. One of the females sighed and adjusted the hook on her hand. What of her storm, the vesture of her life on this world, what would she become as a future mother and wife? She closed her eyes and crawled away from the gully and the advent of an endless war. She would be free, with child and free.

GESTATION PERIOD

Stephanie L. Morrell

Seven year old Kelly Grant was on a mission and nothing would stand in her way. She furiously collected all the plastic eggs that she could and placed them into her brightly colored basket. The eggs were filled with chocolates and jelly beans, but the prize winning basket was filled with so much more. It was filled with toys, books, games and a retail gift card worth fifty dollars at the mall. The parents were all in agreement that the children consumed more than enough candy and so the gift basket was devoid of sweets.

Kelly was announced as the big winner and ran to get her first place prize. She spent several minutes examining the contents while the other children looked on in disappointment and envy.

“What about your eggs?” Daniel asked his daughter.

“What?” Kelly was busy with her gifts.

“Where’s the basket with all of the eggs and candy that you collected?”

“Oh,” Kelly said, suddenly interested. “I want my candy.”

“All right. So where did you leave it, Kiddo?”

“I’m not sure, Daddy.”

They both looked around the grounds but couldn’t find it. They checked the area by the prize table and in grass near the parking lot.

“I can’t find it anywhere, Daddy.” Kelly’s eyes were starting to tear up.

“Relax; it has to be around here somewhere.” Daniel continued looking.

“Is this what you’re searching for?” asked an unfamiliar voice.

“Yes.” Kelly ran to the pretty young woman who was holding her basket. “Thank you, thank you, thank you,” she shouted.

“You’re welcome,” said the young woman. “Here you go.”

Kelly took the basket and looked to her father.

“There you are, Kelly.” He smiled at the woman. “Thanks so much.”

“It wasn’t a problem.” She smiled back; her dark eyes caught the sunlight.

“Where was it?” Daniel asked, feeling a strong attraction.

“The basket was over there.” She pointed in the direction of the woods.

“Oh,” he said with surprise. “You’d better be more careful next time,” he told Kelly.

“I will.” She was full of excitement. “Can we go now? I want to have some candy and play with my toys.”

“Just a second.” His gaze remained on the young woman. “So, do you have a child running around here?”

“No. I just recently moved to town and was asked by one of my neighbors if I would volunteer to help out with the hunt.”

“Oh. Well that was very nice of you.” He offered his hand. “I’m Daniel.”

“Hi there, Daniel.” She took his hand. “My name’s Claudia.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Claudia. So, do you live nearby?” His tone was flirtatious.

“Not too far.” She flirted back with him. “How about you?”

“We live on Red Leaf Road,” Kelly chimed in. “37 Red Leaf Road.”

“Wow,” Claudia giggled. “That’s a lot of information.”

“I know,” Kelly said proudly. “Can we go now, Daddy?”

“All right.”

“It was nice meeting the two of you,” Claudia said with a smile. “I have a feeling that we will run into each other.”

“It’s a small town. Besides, you know my name and where I live. My number is in the book if you want to call me sometime.”

“Oh really?” Claudia grinned.

“Yes,” Daniel said with sincerity. “I would like to hear from you, so call anytime.”

“Perhaps I will. In fact, I’m certain that you will hear from me soon.”

“Good. I’m looking forward to it.”

~~~

“Daddy, can I keep both baskets in my bedroom?”

“Sure,” he said while glancing down at the eggs she had gathered. “What’s inside of those plastic eggs?”

“Some have jelly beans and others have chocolate.”

“I thought that the township wasn’t going to give out junk this year.” He raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, Daddy, that was for the big basket. They had to fill up the plastic eggs with something and candy was probably the only thing that would fit inside.”

“Really?” he chuckled. “Is that your theory, Kiddo?”

“Come on, Daddy.” She looked up at him with her big green eyes. “Can I please keep it in my room?”

“Fine,” he said begrudgingly. “Just don’t tell your mother tomorrow when you’re having Easter dinner. She will give me a hard time for sure.”

“I won’t tell, Daddy... I promise.”

“All right.”

*The last thing that I need is more grief from my ex, he thought. Giving me grief has become a hobby of hers since the divorce.*

~~~

Daniel Grant spent the rest of the day with his daughter. He took her to the local park and then off to the movies to see the latest Disney film. After that they went out for pizza and by the time they returned home, Kelly was half asleep. Daniel helped his daughter change into her nightgown and then gave her a soft kiss on the forehead.

No, Nancy, I didn’t have Kelly brush her teeth before bed. He thought of his ex once more. *The poor kid is exhausted and fell asleep as I was changing her.*

A cracking noise came from behind Daniel. He looked around the room but nothing seemed out of the ordinary. All the toys were put away and the knick-knacks on the dresser were in order. The only thing different in the room tonight was that Kelly’s desk had two baskets sitting on top of it. The larger was still wrapped in cellophane and the smaller one was filled to the top with brightly colored plastic eggs filled with sugar and empty calories.

“Kelly won’t mind if I grab one,” he whispered and selected a green egg. Daniel held the egg in his hand and shook it. “Sounds like jellybeans.” He grinned. “My favorite.”

Daniel took one last glance back at his sleeping daughter and smiled.

Sweet dreams, Kiddo.

~~~

Daniel woke to sounds of gagging and retching. The awful noises were coming from Kelly's bedroom; he quickly got out of bed and headed down the hallway. He flipped on the light in Kelly's room and saw her lying on her side, vomiting profusely. Daniel ran to her and began to wipe her face with his t-shirt. Her lips and mouth were covered in a thick secretion that resembled mucus, but seemed to be in a gelatin form.

"You poor thing." He pulled the waste can from the corner of the room and put it beneath her face. "It's all right," he said soothingly. "You're going to be just fine."

Kelly continued to retch until her stomach was dry and empty. The content of what came out of her was thick and slimy, with swirls of pastel colors that matched the jelly beans she had eaten throughout the day.

"I don't feel so good, Daddy." She moaned the words and held her stomach.

"Did you eat more candy after I put you to bed?" he asked, already knowing the answer. "Did you?" he repeated the question softly.

"Yes," she said. "Sorry." Her face was pale and tears formed in her eyes.

"I think being sick is punishment enough."

Daniel took Kelly into the bathroom where he gently washed her face and neck. He had her put on a fresh pair of pajamas and then lifted the Easter basket up from the floor.

"What are you doing with that, Daddy?"

"I'm going to keep it in my room."

"No, Daddy. Please don't."

"No arguments."

"But..."

"But nothing, Kiddo. Now, would you like some crackers and soda?"

"No," she said sharply."

"Are you sure," he asked, trying not to laugh at her stubborn ways. "All right." He leaned down and kissed her on the head. "Love ya, Kiddo. If you need anything just come and wake me up."

"Fine." She was still angry about losing her Easter basket for the night.

“See you in the morning.”

Daniel put the basket down on his dresser and got back into bed. He hadn't paid close attention to the contents. If he had, he would have noticed the slimy film covering the plastic eggs. This film ran over the edge of the basket, made a trail across the carpet in Kelly's room and left streak marks up the side of her comforter and onto the pillow case. Inside the basket, under all the candy, was an egg and it had cracked open. Something had hatched from the egg and made its way up to Kelly's mouth and slid down her throat. Daniel barely looked at the basket; he got into bed and drifted off to sleep without a care. He was dead to the world when the contents of the basket started to move.

~~~

“Daddy!” Kelly shouted, as she saw the state of her father. “What's wrong with you, Daddy?”

There was no reply. Daniel was still and covered in yellow mucus. The thick substance was across his mouth, ran down the side of his face and dripped off onto the floor. A thick trail led back to the Easter basket where Kelly had collected her eggs. The contents were covered in slime and so Kelly backed away. She ran to the phone, dialed 9-1-1 and waited in the doorway for the ambulance to arrive.

“Come with me, sweetie,” said one of the male EMT workers. “Let's get you outside while the nice men and women help your Dad.”

“But I want...”

“It's going to be all right.”

Kelly looked back over her shoulder and caught a glimpse of the EMT tech working on her Dad. The woman had her hair pulled up and a small white painter's mask covering her face. Still, Kelly could see her eyes and the eyes looked familiar.

Where do I know you from? Kelly thought. I know you.

~~~

“Kelly. Oh my God! What are you doing out here by yourself?” Nancy was frantic.”

"They told me to call you and then wait outside 'til it was safe." Kelly was close to tears. "Then they took Daddy away in an ambulance."

"What?" Nancy looked around "This is ridiculous! We've no idea of what's going on and no idea where they took your father."

Nancy stood up and went for the front door but it was locked tight. A small quarantine sign was sealed across the door as a warning to those who were overly curious.

"Kelly, honey, what happened?" She held her daughter's face in both hands. "Are you all right? Do you feel sick?" She spoke the words fast and frantic.

"No, I'm fine. They checked me before they left."

"Checked you for what?" Nancy started to tremble.

"I don't know, but they said I was fine and could go."

"Well, I don't feel very safe here," Nancy whispered. "Let's get you out of here and back home."

"But what about Dad?" Kelly's eyes were swimming with tears.

"Don't you worry about that," Nancy said reassuringly. "We'll find out just what the hell's going on.

~~~

Daniel awoke to find himself in a stark white room where he was bound tightly to a gurney. He tried to shout for help, but a thick film of mucus covered his mouth and sealed in all sounds. The people working around him were all dressed in protective gear and wore masks. The term 'infectious disease' was passed back and forth between conversations and it made Daniel frantic. He was already suffering from an unbearable stomach ache and the pain in his esophagus was nearing the breaking point for his sanity.

"Looks like his throat is starting to distend." Dr. Pinter leaned in close. "Yes. I can see the flesh beginning to form stress lines. Soon it will crack open and we will have our organism alive and in the flesh."

"Maybe, Claudia," he addressed the doctor by name. "Of course, we don't know how it will survive on the outside. We have made ourselves adaptable to earth because it is extremely similar to the atmosphere of our own planet. Unfortunately, you know as well as I do that our attempts at breeding new life forms have failed in the past. Their immune systems were

just not strong enough. I am really hoping that this sterile environment, along with Mr. Grant's biological and chemical makeup, will blend with our alien life form during gestation. Perhaps that will be the key to making it adaptable to earth."

"Have some faith, Dr. Collins." Claudia studied Daniel and thought nothing more of him than a mere vessel for her experiment. He was her hope for repopulating the earth with her own kind. "I do."

THE PRISONER

Neil Leckman

The apartment had been taken over by men in hazmat suits and I'm locked away in this stupid eight foot by eight foot room. They keep interrogating me and I keep telling them the exact same things every time. No, I'm not an agent for some alien race here to dominate the Earth. No, I am not an alien and no matter how hard you tug on my skin it is not coming off and it hurts like hell. No, there is no spacecraft hidden nearby or far away for that matter. Once again that is a skin rash I have, I'm allergic to certain soaps.

"Hey, can somebody out there bring me something to eat? I'm starving!" I yelled at the metal door of my cell.

"Do you like to eat brains?" came over the speaker in the ceiling of my cell.

"NO!!"

"Do you like to eat skin?" the tinny voice asked.

"A peanut butter and jelly sandwich would be great, or just bread and water, since I gather I'm in prison," I said, with a hint of sarcasm.

"We noticed the sarcasm in your voice. What does that mean?"

"You're smarter than I thought," I said, sitting on the folding cot that had been brought to me.

"So you have been observing us?" the voice said triumphantly.

I just sat there glaring at the overhead speaker, resisting the urge to scream. I've been here now for at least two days, maybe longer, maybe shorter, time is hard to figure when you can't see anything but walls and the lights never dim.

"How long have you kept me here with all of these questions?" I asked.

"Do you calculate time in the same units that we use?" the speaker asked.

"Since birth," I replied.

"So you were born here to a family of sleeper agents from your home world?" the speaker asked.

"No, I was born to a milkman and his wife who cut hair for a living," I said.

"So you have a similar family structure on your planet?"

This time I did scream, long and loud...

~~~

Just graduating from college and landing a research job with a major corporation was a stroke of luck, or so I thought. The company had a small secret facility right downtown, two block from the main courthouse. I took some tests and had my background checked, since most of the research was top secret, and passed the drug tests. My college professor recommended me and the hiring manager said that was what really swayed them. The first day I parked my car in the subterranean lot and took the elevator down four levels to the main lobby. I was greeted by a team of security guards wrestling with a pretty big moose that seemed bent on getting a coke out of the vending machine. The machine was on its side and a large hole had been torn out or smashed in, it was hard to tell. A can rolled up to me with a tiny stream of soda squirting out of it. It soaked my shirt and, as I was trying to move out of the way, a man with the head of a walrus ran bugling into the room and tried to help the moose. There were two ducks in the other room watching from the doorway.

“Can I help you?” a young woman asked me. She was sitting at her desk answering phones and acting like this was normal here. She was pretty and I moved around the walrus to get to her desk. That’s when I noticed she had two heads and four arms. One head was beckoning me over while the other one answered phones and typed into one of the computers.

“Yes, today is my first day of work here,” I said, after dodging away from one of the lunges the moose made. It must have been good because a cheer went up from the walrus and ducks. I heard a sound like lightning and it went silent.

I would have thought this was all very strange except for the fact that the state employment office was the one that recommended I apply for this job. The young woman handed me a packet and asked me to sign a form acknowledging I got it. Inside was my ID badge and paperwork about when and where orientation was, the health plan information and stuff like that. The day was pretty mellow after that, in fact rather mundane. It was a blur of meeting new people in various divisions I’d be working with and tours of the different labs. At the end of the hallway was a giant vault door that remained closed the entire time I was there. Some of the research was into

things I had no knowledge of. My degree had been in genetic sciences with a minor in physics. One room had a glass enclosure that was full of odds things, walking fish, giant gnats and a slug with a horse's head. I didn't even ask, I was just glad to have a job and the Lake Tanna Corporation was a well known one. I was given a locker for my clothes and shown a refrigerator to put my lunch in. All I had was a meager sandwich and a pack of ding dongs, but I put the sack in the fridge anyway. I went home that night and was on cloud nine.

It was a month after I started working there that someone brought me a sack and set it on my desk. "Found this in the fridge with your name, looks like it's been there for a while too." I opened the top and peeked inside at the bright green sandwich, but the ding dongs had vanished. Without thinking about it, I tossed the bag into my backpack to take care of later. That night when I reached in and felt the paper bag, I remembered the lunch with the funky sandwich. I tossed it into the garbage under my kitchen sink and forgot about it.

A week later as I was sitting watching television I heard a sound under the kitchen sink like something moving around. I walked over and opened the cupboard and looked inside. First thing that hit me was the smell, rancid sulfurous butter is the best description I can give of the smell. OK, I'll be the first to admit I'm not diligent in taking out my trash. There inside the garbage can, along with withered fingers of a hardened banana peel and a seeping mystery food group was the paper sack I'd tossed in there. It was shaking as if something moved inside. Freaked out, I grabbed a broom and beat the crap out of it. Then I took that garbage pail and threw the entire thing into the apartment complex dumpster, hoping I killed what I assumed was a mouse.

Two nights later the girl that lives down the hall asked if I'd seen her cat recently. No, but I mentioned that I'd heard a cat or two the last few days beating the crap out of each other.

During the next couple of days other neighbors reported missing pets, shortly after that children started not coming home from school. That night the security people came from Lake Tanna and took me to a facility I hadn't seen before and began questioning me. I'm sure my funky lunch isn't waltzing off with children to dance under the moonlight, but they aren't listening. If they thought I was an alien why did they hire me? All I know is

that I'm hungry as hell, tired of the stupid questions and that spot where the sack leaked out on me is itching like hell!!

As I was scratching it my fingernail caught on something and tore it loose. Looking down I noticed a nice gouge in my forearm. The strange part was the fact it wasn't bleeding. I held my hand up and looked at the chunk of skin hanging from my finger. It didn't look like skin at all, it was a pale color with the consistency of a sponge. I flung it away from me and it hit the wall with a wet smack and stuck there. Out of boredom I tore out more chunks and stuck them all over my cell. Looking down I realized that I had torn out a significant part of my left arm. I walked over and looked at the first piece I'd thrown. There were little nodules like blisters forming on it and while I watched, one burst open and something puffed out into the air like a fine powder. Some got on my arm and I wiped it on my pants. I sat on my cot to think about what was happening. As I did I heard the soft pop of another one. Looking up at the speaker I got an idea. I tore a chunk off my arm and flung it into the center of the box where it clung tenaciously as the loud music they kept playing tried to vibrate it off. Lying down, I nodded off.

I woke disoriented in darkness and silence. I remembered throwing a chunk of my arm into the speaker. Did that really happen? Reaching with my right hand I felt my left forearm. It had a chunk missing and it had a spongy feel. When I stood up, it just hung useless, obviously whatever happened to it had progressed while I slept. Looking around I spotted a dim light in what I thought was the direction of the door. I noticed it was open and the door frame was covered in something that hung down from the ceiling. Being careful not to let it touch me, I ducked down and went out the door.

There was a hallway that went in two directions. To my right there was a light about forty feet away. It appeared to be one of those emergency lanterns that turn on in a power outage. The walls were covered in something that looked organic and in some places I could see hints of bioluminescence. A soft green glow coming from the walls added an eerie feeling. I walked towards the light. There were things that looked like feathers hanging down from the ceiling, moving as if there was a breeze. On the walls were more of the swollen nodules, some with larger things moving inside them. I passed what looked like it might have been a guard

earlier today. Now it was a pile of clothing with large blue mold growing on them.

Alarms went off and flashing rotating red lights began turning on all over the building. A muted voice was saying, “Danger! Biological breach in section 37, containment procedures engaged. All personnel report to the nearest decontamination room for further instructions!”

In the distance I heard screams, howls and gun fire. Overhead whatever it was on the wall engulfed the rotating lights, letting a few stray beams through. Some of the things on the walls burst, creating a haze of dust. It burned my eyes and it hurt to breathe. I looked down at what was left of the guard for a gas mask, but I wasn’t so lucky. Something with tentacles and one leg hopped past me and vanished around the corner. My legs began to hurt and I began walking faster.

Closer to the light I looked down at my legs and saw those blisters all over them, only mine were oozing pus in thin trickles. I heard a voice in my head calming me. It was telling me that it would be over quickly and then I’d be able to leave the facility. I would be the first of many and my new masters were not of this Earth. I looked up at a speaker in the ceiling of the hallway.

“Hey, ask me if I’m alien again!! C’mon, ask me!” I yelled; my throat hurting with the effort. A weakness set in and I slumped against the wall.

“Next time we meet I ask the questions,” I whispered as I began to melt and merge with the rest of the hallway...

## WE'LL NEVER KNOW

*Ken L. Jones*

Minutes ticked away like expanding nebula  
In the remarkable garden where I underwent a change  
Because I ate seeds that had heartbeats  
And once I had ingested them  
They turned into beautiful gems  
And then as I tingled with the momentous contact  
With these entities who I wondered what they really looked like  
And all I can say for certain is that they had long not worn their natural  
faces  
And where they once had come from had been doomed by an exploding  
star  
So now they travel forever between worlds as easily  
As we journey to the bottom of the sea and other such earthly places  
And as they slip sideways through space and time  
They reach out occasionally and catch with grapple beams  
Data and formulas from the brains from such as I  
To fuel machinery such as I can little comprehend  
And then as they glowed with dazzling brilliance  
They lifted up once again towards the trackless depths  
Leaving me quaking in bewilderment in that opalescent garden  
Whose exact location remains unknown to me even yet.

## THE SOUND OF TREE FROGS

*Brian Barnett*

Trumpeting victory music and credits began to play on the television screen. Roger clicked off the black and white floor model and Jim stretched his legs and quickly tossed aside the pillow he was clutching onto.

“The movie scare ya?” asked Roger, teasing Jim with a not-too-suppressed grin.

“Naw, daddy, you know better’n that. I like them spook movies.”

“Good, you’re twenty-eight years old. It’s about time you man up.”

“I weren’t scared-” Jim paused suddenly. He listened intently for a moment as Roger returned to his easy chair. “Sounds like a flyin’ saucer outside, daddy.”

“That ain’t no flyin’ saucer, them’s tree frogs.”

“It sounds just like them flyin’ saucers on the TV, though. The sky’s all lit up too.”

Roger peered out the window, but saw nothing. “It’s probably just some heat lightnin’ or somethin’. If you can’t handle these old spook movies, I’m goin’ to stop lettin’ you stay up to watch ‘em.”

“I ain’t scared.” Jim swallowed hard and flinched as another flash lit up the window.

Roger saw the fear on Jim’s childlike face. “Alright, alright. I’m goin’ out on the porch. I’ll prove to ya there ain’t nothin’ out there but them ol’ tree frogs.”

He pushed open the screeching aluminum door and stepped out on the make-shift cinder block porch. He waved his arms over his head. “Hey you, aliens! Y’all come down here and beam me up or somethin’. Jim here wants to talk to ya!

“No I don’t!” Jim yelled out, not sure who he was talking to.

Roger ducked in the doorway with a satisfied smile. “See, it ain’t nothin’ but tree frogs!”

A bright flash disintegrated Roger. An intense wave of heat rushed through the trailer. A burst of swirling ashes and smoke slowly dissipated out the door and into the night sky.

Then the sound of the tree frogs faded and the flashing lights disappeared into the night air.



## ASHER'S ENNUI

*George Wilhite*

Asher Moore walked outside the morning after the incident.

His parents would never see him again.

All communications were down so there were still no clear answers regarding the arrival of the alien machinery the previous night. The last image the Moore household witnessed on television before all went black was the footage shown over and over of the mysterious metallic cylinders falling from the sky.

There was no mother ship, or any kind of vessel for that matter, visible via microscopes, lenses, or satellites, so the origin of the cylinders was also unknown.

The Moores did hear about an hour of news on the radio before that media source went dead as well. First-hand accounts of the opening of some of the cylinders. Nothing was alive inside according to these news flashes. They merely discharged either a noxious gas within a pale green mist, or a thick green gelatinous ooze.

That was all they knew.

Greg Moore tried to convince his family to stay inside. They had seen other people and some animals walking outside apparently unharmed by the cylinders' emissions.

"Maybe the gas takes a while to harm us," he pleaded with his wife, Rhonda.

His fifteen year old son Asher responded, "Come on, Dad. It's not like this house is hermetically sealed or anything. If that gas is toxic, it's in here too."

"He has a point, Greg," Rhonda said.

"Rhonda, what if you go out there and everyone wigs out or something? I forbid it."

The Moores were an old-fashioned family, the kind of household dynamic in which if their male leader forbade something, well, that was the end of the discussion. Or at least his wife and son made sure their actions led him to believe that was the case.

The next few hours passed in incredible boredom.

Rhonda thumbed through magazines and Greg paced the length of the house, mumbling incoherent theories of what action should be taken. Asher sat and stewed with nervous energy. Without cable television, his Wii or a working DVD player, he had no options left. He was a child of the Twenty First Century—all his stimulation came from electronic devices. Gadgets run by batteries did not work either this morning. So, no Ipod, no Kindle either. Whatever else these aliens were up to, they had taken communications back more than a hundred years.

This profound ennui led Asher to disobey orders and sneak out as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Mom was in the bathroom and Dad was fiddling with the radio in one of the bedrooms, so Asher was gone.

Nobody was around as he walked down the street to his best friend Jack's house. He wondered if Jack and his family were okay. Jack would certainly agree to venture out into the world after the incident to investigate. He was no doubt as hopelessly bored inside his house as Asher had been.

The first thing Asher noticed upon reaching Jack's house was the front door was open. This was a decent neighborhood but nobody was comfortable enough with its security to leave their door open. Peering inside as he slowly approached, he could see the place was ruined. Furniture was strewn about and debris littered the floors.

*This does not look good at all*, he thought as he reached the doorway.

Pale green mist wisped through the living room. Asher retched at the stench of the gas the mist carried. *Like sulfur mixed with piss*, he gagged. In the middle of the floor was a gaping pit, covering the expanse of the living room, kitchen and dining room. The hole looked like it was formed from beneath the house and then built upwards. It had ripped through walls and furniture in its path with little effort.

Ten large tentacles slithered out from the pit as though searching for prey. Asher gasped as he took a few steps forward to look down inside the pit.

“Jack?” he called out. “Mister and Missis Fenster?” There was no human response, but his voice increased the intensity of movement among the tentacles.

“Shit!” Asher was unsure whether to look further for his friend or just *get the Hell out of there*.

He did not have a second longer to ponder that decision. One of the tentacles wrapped around him and drew him down into the pit with

incredible speed.

Thoughts raced through his mind. *How could this thing have formed from gas and that disgusting gelatin over night? Or did this monster descend on the world after the cylinders? When the world was dark and silent? Pain racked his body as the tentacle squeezed with tremendous power. Beneath the floor he saw an endless mass of slimy flesh and more of the gelatin which carried the same rancid odor as the mist above. The tentacle thrust Asher into a small opening in the body of the creature. He was stuffed in so tightly he became one with the monster.*

Asher cried out to his family and Jack's in vain. No answer at all.

*At least my death will be quick down here. Who knows what's in store up above now?*

But Asher would soon learn the *naiveté* of that assertion.

Centuries passed in the belly of the beast as it stretched out and grew, adding many more humans and fellow creatures to its hideous construction. Asher would feel his life draining out, certain his death was imminent and then feel inexplicably re-energized through some osmosis from the alien flesh surrounding him. This process continued without end.

*It's like I'm a rechargeable battery. An energy source for this vile thing.*

Pain came in waves as did the constant torture of the extraordinary cycle of exhaustion and rejuvenation. Apparently this was his eternity now, to meld with this beast. His flesh was slowly dissolving and being replaced by a skin more like that of his captor. *How long will it be before I am not even recognizable as "human"?*

Though he never saw his family or Jack again, many humans were stuck into this festering Hell around him. They cried for their loved ones but this monster did not seem to know pity or remorse.

It merely used them to survive.

## LAST THOUGHT

*Bethany Wilhelm*

Platt dangled the paper between his thumb and index finger, trying to read it at an incredibly awkward angle. As the youngest team member, being born within our base walls, he had probably never seen a printed document before. I couldn't remember the last time I read off of anything besides my monitor back at headquarters, so I was just as uncertain as Platt as to how to hold the document. Wilkins, on the other hand, being a man always completely sure of himself, snatched the paper out of Platt's flimsy grip and held it at arm's length to read it. He squinted up his eyes in an analytical glare at the document and his white moustache quivered as he moved his lips along with the typed words.

Giovanni sauntered up behind him, reading over Wilkins' shoulder. I tried to gauge their facial reactions to determine whether or not the document boded ill. But as always, Giovanni remained passive and Wilkins looked just as infuriated as he did any given day. He seemed to be reading the paper multiple times for clarity, but Giovanni appeared satisfied to scan it just once. He tore his eyes away from the document and glanced up at me. I raised an eyebrow at him, nonverbally asking what the situation was. He shrugged slightly, the same way he would shrug whenever a Torchling smashed the glass of its holding cell but was still held back by its chains. There was definitely a problem, but it was a contained problem and thus nothing to get worked up about.

I clacked my fingernails impatiently against my gun holster. After skimming it one more time and making an affirmative grunt, Wilkins handed the paper over to me. I carefully imitated the way he held it, using both hands to hold it at arm's length even though my eyes were better than his. Platt's tall form came into my peripheral vision as I rubbed the paper's thin material between my fingers. He stood beside me and we read the words printed in a bold, blocky font:

hello friends:

please wait at the desk and our secretary will escort you inside.  
thank you.

Immediately after he finished reading the sentence in the center of the page, Platt swore at Wilkins and scoffed, “Did you skip a pill that it took you that long to read this thing?”

Wilkins’ huge tomato of a face turned an even deeper red than usual and he was about to unleash what was sure to be a colorfully complicated oath at Platt when I interrupted, lifting the paper in my hands and saying, “What do you make of this, Sergeant?”

Wilkins huffed at Platt and turned to me. Cutting to the chase, he spoke in short chops of sentences. “The letters capitalized. One of ours.”

I was running several different acronyms through my head to fill the letters: Internal Chamber of Undertaking, Interspatial Control Utilities, Intensive-care Unit. I wouldn’t have thought about any corps and apparently neither did Platt. Seeing his gaping mouth and blank stare, Giovanni spelled it out for him, saying, “Intergalactic Corps Upsilon.”

Our fireteam of Wilkins, Giovanni, Platt and myself was at the bottom of the hierarchy for Intergalactic Corps Omicron. I hardly thought about the ranks in my own corps, much less any of the others. For a moment I doubted the likelihood of the note in my hands actually tying in with Upsilon. But then I realized that this was the same planet that Upsilon and a dozen others corps disappeared on three cycles ago; this was the same area Upsilon was last known to be in before the firestorms swept this half of the planet clean; this was obviously an intergalactic military base we were standing in, albeit a very dilapidated one.

When we had first walked in, I saw that the metal columns lining the entry hall had patches of rust around the top and bottom and the dark ceiling looked like it was about to cave in. The whole place reeked of its rusting walls and every step my team took towards the kiosk at the back wall, no matter how careful, made the floor creak and groan. It seemed clear to me that the place hadn’t been inhabited in years, but when I absentmindedly muttered this to myself, Giovanni shook his head. He swiped his finger in a nook of the kiosk and held it up covered in dust.

He slid his handheld scanner out of one of his vest pockets and waved it over his hand, causing the gadget to shine white, grid-shaped rays over his dusty finger. The rays turned green as the gadget finished its assessment and Giovanni explained the meaning of the symbols on its small screen. “Dust usually consists mostly of dead skin,” he said, “and the top layer of this dust has quite recently settled.”

“And what constitutes as recent?” said Wilkins.

“About a week.”

Platt, wanting to appear as though he knew what was going on, put on an inquisitive expression and leaned over the kiosk, mimicking Giovanni’s finger swipe. It was then that he noticed the paper set on the cushion of the missing secretary’s chair.

I now clutched that paper between my grubby fingers, not sure if Giovanni’s notion of us not being alone was good or bad. In optimism, I was inclined to believe Wilkins’ presupposition that we had stumbled upon a base full of Upsilon refugees and that it was their skin that was flaking off to make the dust. But there was a part of me, the more rational part, that said Torchlings could make just as much dust with their dead skin as humans could.

“Should we continue on, Sergeant?” I asked Wilkins.

“It’s either that or we wait for the next airship to take us back to base. We’ll keep moving.”

He plucked the paper out of my hands, crinkling it around the edges with his rough handling. I reluctantly began to follow him towards a side door leading out of the entrance hall when I heard the click of Giovanni’s headset. I looked and saw that he had his finger on his earpiece, pushing it deeper in his earlobe so that he could hear more clearly. In his free hand he held his scanner which flashed symbols across its screen that meant it was linking up with the transmitter in his ear.

“Whatcha doing, G?” Platt asked him.

“Sending the dust sample back to headquarters.”

“What for?” Platt persisted.

“Checking what’s in there besides human skin,” Giovanni replied with finality. He then tucked his scanner back in his pocket and walked past Platt to avoid having to explain further. I gave Giovanni a grateful look and he gave a curt nod in response.

Neither of us would dare contradict Wilkins if he wanted to move forward, but both us of had been in the science lab whereas Wilkins had not. We’d seen Torchlings up close even before we had first gone into battle with them and we’d seen what they could do. There was a lot of dust on that desk and if it was made from so many Torchlings’ skin... I shuddered to think about what would happen to us. Placing a hand on my laser tube for comfort, I jogged past Platt to catch up with Giovanni and Wilkins.

“Why are they called Torchlings?” Platt asked to fill the silence.

Wilkins’ head spun around and he made a one-handed choking gesture to suggest Platt shut his trap. It seemed common sense to me to not make noise where Torchlings might be, but Platt wasn’t a soldier like the rest of us. The firestorms on planet Chi had wiped out half of the corps, so inexperienced young men like Platt had to be taken to fill the gaps in the army.

Apparently civilians didn’t care to know about the Torchlings or the war with the Kaians so long as they didn’t have to deal with them. Fresh out of his parents’ house, Platt had no idea what was going on with the galaxy or the things trying to destroy it. I at least had basic knowledge about Torchlings before I joined the corps and that was even before I first started working in the lab as an Undertaker. It perturbed me that civilians like Platt didn’t care why so many colonies were dead. I suppose if it had been his own family that had been caught in a firestorm or murdered by alien creatures then Platt would actually make an effort to remember the facts we all kept repeating to him.

Wilkins led us behind a column and proceeded to check the area with his scanner. Its invisible-set grid rays swept over the room. Wilkins looked at us and shook his head. No living things nearby. I seized the opportunity to whisper to Platt what I’d been telling him over and over for half a cycle now.

“They’re called Torchlings,” I said, “because the first ones were discovered after the firestorms and were all fire-based. The name stuck even after they found others that were bio, metal, or water-based.”

Platt nodded to convey comprehension, but I knew I’d have to explain it to him again once we got back to headquarters. I scowled and rolled my eyes. As my gaze shifted away from Platt’s bobbing head and over to Giovanni’s crouched form on my right, I noticed something white beyond the edge of his boot. I cocked my head and leaned to the side to see around Giovanni. Behind him there was a piece of paper lying on the floor.

I struck Giovanni’s shoulder and pointed at the parchment. He took a double take at it just like I did. Like the note at the secretary desk, the pristine white paper stuck out against the rusty black floor. How did we not notice it when we got in there?

He dragged it over with his boot, not wanting to get up from behind the pillar with us, and picked it up as casually as Wilkins had, though with a much gentler hand. Giovanni didn't even pause to read it before handing it over to Wilkins, and our sergeant stared at it for a long time, but mercifully not as long as he read over the first paper we found. When he wordlessly handed it back to Giovanni, Wilkins dragged his scanner back out of his pocket, muttering curses and wishing handheld scanners worked as well as the stationary scanners back at base. Platt scooted closer to me as Giovanni held up the paper for the three of us to read.

hello friends:

all recruited officers must report to the Internal Chamber of Undertaking for briefing. thank you.

"Still nothing," Wilkins suddenly growled, stuffing his scanner back in his pocket. "Let's go to the Internal Chamber then."

"Sir, you can't be serious," I had the audacity to say. "We could just be walking into a trap." Immediately I wanted to backhand myself for letting all of that come out of my mouth.

"A trap by who? The Kaians? Torchlings? Neither of those races can write," Wilkins spat. "You're under my orders, Larsen, and what I say goes." I tried keep myself from so much as blinking even he sprayed me in the face with his saliva. Flinching would only dig me a deeper hole for when we got back to headquarters. "If there are surviving corps men here, I'm not letting a lab rat like you say anything against it. Don't you care about your fellow man, Larsen? Well, don't you!?"

"Yes, sir," I said stiffly. By the way that came out of my mouth, with my teeth and fists clenched, it sounded as though I wanted nothing more than for Wilkins and all other corps men to die by Torchling hands. But I didn't want that, not even for Wilkins. And if Wilkins had ever seen a Torchling as close as I had, then he would know why.

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The Intergalactic Corps all had fairly similar military headquarters, so the whole team had an idea of where to go. Once we made it to the lab level, Giovanni, who doubled as a scientist back at base, made quick work of the

maze of test areas and storage rooms. Eventually we made it through to the Chambers of Undertaking and I was stunned at how silent it was.

It hadn't surprised me that the rest of the base was dead silent, aside from our creaking footsteps, but I was just so accustomed to the Undertaking Chambers being the loudest part of a base. Over the cycles, I'd become numb to the Torchlings' shrieking and banging around their holding cells. Now that I was in a Chamber filled with utter silence, I felt numb in a completely different way.

I led the fireteam through many passages and empty rooms to get to the inner Chamber. Occasionally I would exchange confused glances with Giovanni. As a scientist, he would come down to the Undertaking Chambers every now and again to assist with experiments on the Torchlings, so Giovanni was probably as aware as I was that none the Undertaking equipment had ever been used.

We ultimately came to a dome-shaped hallway identical to the one back at headquarters. There were three doors leading out. The two on the ends led to odds and ends storage rooms for Torchling autopsies. The center one, which had a brilliantly white piece of paper set on the floor in front of it, led to the Internal Chamber of Undertaking. Wilkins shoved his way past Platt and bent down to pick up the paper. I read it over his shoulder:

hello frIends:
Can yoU help

"Platt, cover me. We're going in." Wilkins shoved the paper in his pocket and stuck a hand under the door to lift it open.

"Wait," Giovanni said. Wilkins instantly stood back up from his bent position, quite taken aback that Giovanni out of anyone on the team would say something against him. Giovanni had a hand up to his earpiece and seemed to be concentrating on the voice on the other end.

"What is it?" Wilkins barked at him once Giovanni let his hand fall.

"Nothing, sergeant. I requested a dust scan from headquarters and nothing's wrong. Proceed."

Wilkins gave an angry nod and instructed us to stand guard outside the door just in case. Astounding me with his strength even in his advanced age, Wilkins lifted the door out of its fixed hold in the floor. Rust and dust was scraped off the sides of the door as it was shoved into the open slot in

its doorframe. Walking in with his rifle ready, Wilkins beckoned a now quivering Platt to follow him into the darkened Chamber, the only room in a base not wired to solar fueled lighting due to the photosensitivity of what was kept inside. Giovanni and I faced away from the door for whatever or whoever might come. The Internal Chamber was always a long room, roughly 150 ft. to the back wall, so I didn't expect Wilkins and Platt to come back out anytime soon considering how slow they were creeping in.

I looked over at Giovanni who was pursing his lips, the same way he did the time a Torchling broke out of its chains. "So," I said to him, "how bad are things really?"

"I honestly can't say. Headquarters said that dust was mostly dust mite bi-products. There actually weren't any dead skin cells in that dust from humans or Torchlings. But those papers," his voice had dropped to a whisper before his sentence trailed off entirely.

"The papers look new," I finished.

For a moment we let the silence do the talking.

"MEN! GET IN HERE!" Wilkins' booming voice resounding off the walls of the Chamber made me jump. In the next instant Giovanni and I bolted into the Internal Chamber. Only when we had sprinted up next to Platt and Wilkins did I realize we hadn't run into any wires along the way. The Internal Chamber back at headquarters had thin metal wires crisscrossing the hall, all at eye level. Attached to the wires were photographs, the last ones known to exist before the war with the Kaians started and we were forced to migrate to planets like Chi. But this hall had no wires and no photographs except for the few Wilkins held in his bare hands.

"Sergeant, those are very sensitive to human touch," I warned. He scoffed.

"But what are they?" said Platt.

"Photographs," said Wilkins. "Still images taken with an old device called a camera. Look." He held them out for Giovanni and me to see.

I hesitated, having always been used to handling photographs with a telekinetic beam to avoid leaving any residue on them, but when Wilkins began shaking the photos mercilessly, I complied and held them the same way I held the documents. Wilkins shined a light from his scanner for me to see. When I saw the subject of the first photo, I nearly dropped it.

It was a holding cell, much like the unused ones we had passed when we came down to the Internal Chamber. But instead of a Torchling inside it, there was a young male Kaian. I was about to look at the next photo when Wilkins suddenly produced a small stack of paper and handed me the one on top.

Hello Friends:

Epsilon has managed to procure an Original which has been locked in a holding cell with a Kaian subject. We will take photos to note the Shifting process.

“Sir, what is this?” I said.

“The photos and the notes were all on the floor in a very neat pile. Look at the next photograph.”

I looked at the other team members and wondered what they were thinking. Platt seemed eager to see the next image. Giovanni was staring blankly at the stack of photos in my hand, but not really paying attention; he had his hand up to his earpiece.

“Speed it up, Larsen,” said Wilkins.

I flipped to the next photo. Being humanoid, Kaians’ facial expressions are fairly easy to read and the one in the photograph was obviously in excruciating pain. Its eyes were slammed shut; its large, three fingered hands were clawing at the glass and its bird-like legs were contorting into awkward angles. Wilkins handed me the next paper.

Hello Friends:

The Shifting process has begun. Our scanners indicate that the subject is now thinking of ways to murder us.

The next picture was of the Kaian with its head snapped back and its mouth agape in a horrified yowl. Its legs had broken. Bones stuck out at painful angles. I read the next document.

Hello Friends:

The subject is at mid-Shift. Our scanners indicate that the subject is thinking of its family and who will take care of them.

My hands were shaking. The Kaians were our enemies, but honestly, did the Epsilon Corps have no sympathy? What the hell kind of experiment was this? My hands were shaking too much to turn over the photo, so Platt took the opportunity to turn it over himself. The next photo was half-Kaian and half... No, it couldn't be. I took the next document.

Hello Friends:

Shifting is almost complete. Our scanners indicate that the subject is thinking of the pain and what its broken body looks like right now.

That was the last document. I still had two more photographs to see. With a trembling hand I flipped the photo over. When I saw it, I nearly threw up. Inside the holding cell in place of the broken Kaian was a bone-based Torchling, pumping blood out of its head and completing circulation of it by absorbing the life liquid back through the skin of its face.

I let that photo and all but one of the others fall to the floor. I held the final photo in my hands. It was a sideways shot, as if the camera and its holder had fallen to the floor. It was a shot of a holding cell with its glass frame broken. The moment I looked up from that photo Wilkins shined the white light of his scanner over the wall in front of us, revealing the broken holding cell in the photo.

"Th-the... the Torchlings?" I said. I didn't know what question to ask Wilkins to fill in the gaps.

Wilkins just nodded solemnly at my stuttering and said in a matter-of-fact tone, "Before the firestorms, before the war, even before you were born, they were there. They were the Originals spoken about in those papers. We called them Finsentians. Final Thoughts. They can see anything you were; learn whatever you knew, become whatever you feared last." He brought a fist up to his forehead and banged it against his skull several times in frustration.

Realization dawned on me and I nearly sank to my feet. "All these years, how could we not have known? The information was there. We knew Torchlings had Human and Kaian DNA. We just thought they were cadavers infected with a flesh eating virus."

"Yes, Larsen, but they never eat the people they kill, do they?" said Wilkins. "You've never seen firsthand what happens to the people they kill,

have you? Of course not. You only know that they try to kill people for a random reason. Well, it's not random. And there is a reason."

"What the hell are you talking about, Wilkins?"

"Soldier logs from the last war documented this same thing. They managed to lock up all their soldiers who were infected with Finsentians. Then the platoons had to leave. All those infected soldiers had to be left to rot. You can't run from a Finsentian. You just have to leave before they realize you're a living thing and pray that they don't follow you."

"Then we need to leave!"

"We're already dead, Larsen," Wilkins said incredibly casually. "Look at your friend. He knows."

My head whipped toward Giovanni, hoping his passive expression would pacify my own fear at the moment. Giovanni still had his hand up to his ear, but I knew he couldn't still be in the middle of a transmission right now. He was staring at nothing and he looked terrified.

"Giovanni! G! What is it?" I said, shaking him.

After a moment, he said in a monotone, "I got a transmission from headquarters. They ran an area check on a stationary scanner and sent the results back. As there are four of us, I thought they had misread the number. They said according to the scanner, there are forty-four people in this room and there have been forty-four people with us ever since we arrived in the entrance hall."

"Well," Wilkins all but laughed, "how 'bout them apples, Platt?"

Platt said nothing.

"Oh, don't worry Platt. Death in war is an honorable death, even if you didn't die by enemy hands."

Nothing.

"P-Platt?" I said.

Platt coughed and something wet hit my face. Disgusted, I brought my hand up to my cheek and pulled it away coated in a dark, sticky substance. I yanked my scanner out of my vest and shined a light on Platt's face. His eyes were bloodshot and a stream of thick red liquid was dribbling out of his mouth. As I reeled back in shock, his head fell back with a snap and his throat emitted revolting cracking sounds. Blood began shooting up out of his mouth in sprinkles with every snapping noise until something began protruding out of his mouth. One vertebrae, two, three... His ribcage seemed to fall where his intestines should be and the skin of his back began

caving into the empty cavity left behind. All the while his spinal column was shooting out of his mouth, each vertebrae clacking against the back of his teeth.

I heard Giovanni and myself swearing and shouting in terror as Platt Shifted into a bone-based Torchling. I might've just stood there and kept screaming if Giovanni hadn't grabbed me by the vest strap and dragged me out in a dead sprint.

Behind us, I heard Wilkins cackling and firing his rifle off on Platt's mutating body. "Is that the best you got, Last Thought? Is that all you got!? You'll have to try harder if you want my body! Ha!"

I didn't dare look back to see Platt fully Shifted. Even if I wanted to, Giovanni wouldn't slow down enough for me to get the chance. I thought we would just keep running once we got past the doorway, not shutting the door in case of the slim chance that our sergeant would follow after us. But as soon as we got back into the dome-shaped hall outside the Internal Chamber, we stopped dead in our tracks.

All over the wall, in varying sizes and handwritings, was written the same three letters: ICU.

"Oh, God," I whispered. Seeing it repeated so many times, I finally got it.

Suddenly the two doors of the storage closets flew open and all the autopsy equipment came shooting out. A quick glance inside showed me that there was nothing in the closets to throw them.

"Come on!" Giovanni rasped, tugging me out of the way of a flying scalpel and getting me running with him again.

We darted through the Undertaking Chambers, adrenaline pumping through our veins. When I heard fast hammering footfalls far behind us, too many to just be one pair of feet, I knew Platt and Wilkins were now following us. And by the clunky, machine-like tromp that echoed through the base, I feared Wilkins' last thoughts of firing his rifle had made him Shift into a metal-based Torchling.

We had just crossed the threshold into the laboratory level when there was a great clamor a few feet in front of us. In the hallway ahead, a clear bubbling liquid was spreading across the floor, and several yellow barrels rolled across the puddles. "Acid!" Giovanni exclaimed. "They're using the lab's chemicals to block the way out!"

My eyes flashed at some holding cells in an adjacent room. “Follow me,” I said.

I skidded to a halt in front of a desk and quickly got Giovanni to help me move it. “What are you doing?” he said when he realized we were moving it in front of the holding cells. “We can’t lock ourselves in these things and hope for a rescue.”

“The base can sustain contact with acid, and if we climb on top of them, we might be able to open a hole in the ceiling with our weaponry. Hurry!”

Without further questions, he stepped with me on top of the desk and began climbing onto the holding cell. Just as acid began pooling towards the desk, I leapt off of it and slung myself over the cell’s cylindrical top, scraping my boots against the glass as I straightened myself. Lifting my knees and fighting back adrenaline that now made me shake uncontrollably, I managed to get a steady position and wasted no time in starting that hole in the ceiling. I was reaching for my laser tube when Giovanni let out an earsplitting cry.

I imagined Platt or Wilkins had got to him, but their tromping footsteps had been halted at the edge of the acid pool. I looked and saw that Giovanni was halfway onto the holding cell, but his arms were both split open down the middle and the skin of his face was opening all over like wrapping on a present. His body began breaking before my eyes as Finsentians swarmed him.

Worse, his cry had startled me and I dropped my laser tube. Before hitting the ground, it shot off a white hot laser that ignited all the chemicals on the floor and, in the next instant we were engulfed in flames. Overtaken, Giovanni lost his grip on the holding cell and fell into the inferno. Even as he burned alive, Finsentians were ripping him apart inside and out. I cried out to him, “Clear your head!”

I was crying hot tears from a horrific mix of fear, grief, and anger. “You won’t become one of them if you’re not thinking about anything! AAARGH!” I yelled as I felt my ankles being twisted all the way around and pulled away like I was a ‘droid having his feet replaced. More bones snapped. Blood began trickling into my vision. I felt invisible hands all over and inside me, scratching, yanking, tearing.

Clear your head, Larsen, I thought. Think of nothing...

I am like the Originals. When they were born, they had no experiences. No memories. Nothing to think about. They thought of nothing, so they are nothing. In my Rebirth, I thought of nothing. G thought of nothing. So now, we are like the Originals. We are nothing. And we hate it.

If only we had the proper thought, the thought of a body not our own, then we would be truly dead and out of our misery instead of Reborn and left in these forms. We would have bodies. I would have a body. But instead I have no form. And I hate it.

I have to have a form. A proper form. But I must take a life so that I may be Reborn one more time. Just one more time.

I wait here in the ruins with the others, waiting for the next living things. Waiting for a life. I pray that the life I take will have the proper Last Thought.

TO WALK AMONG THE STARS AGAIN

D.L. Chance

The head nurse hung up the phone and looked over at an LVN standing across the counter, studying the day shift's situation report.

"They're bringing in an old man," she said, a smile brightening her otherwise jaded facial features. "Someone in a taller building saw him lying on a roof across the alley and called 911. He was apparently stark naked and they think he was there most of the afternoon."

"Naked?" The LVN shivered involuntarily. "It can't be more than thirty-five or forty degrees outside," she said. "He must have been freezing up there."

"The EMT said besides the hypothermia he appears to be extremely malnourished, too. Looks like they got to him just in time. They're about five minutes out." She pointed at the row of treatment alcoves. "I'll send him to Three."

The LVN hung the report clipboard on a rack. "I'll get it ready," she said, turning away. "Is he still naked?"

"Oh yeah." The head nurse chuckled. "So you might have to clean him up some."

The LVN drew a deep breath and walked briskly toward Examination Cubicle Number Three. She checked to make sure there were plenty of blankets handy and called the staff dietitian, who said someone would be along presently to assess any possible nutrition protocols that might apply to the patient's needs.

Satisfied that everything was ready she glanced into the hallway, where something unusual seemed to be going on.

"What's up," she asked a passing nursing student.

"A van loaded with Girl Scouts ran off the road and turned over," the young woman said. "There's eight or nine of them coming in one of those big stretch limos that happened to be passing when the accident occurred, but they don't seem to be hurt all that bad. Maybe a few broken arms, that sort of thing. Nothing requiring any surgery."

"How long out?"

"A couple minutes."

“Thanks,” the LVN said while the student rushed away. She was wondering if she should go help out when she saw EMTs bringing what had to be her geriatric patient through the automatic doors at the entrance to the ER. He was sitting up, his skinny white chest and shoulders looking more like soap than human skin under the harsh lights and one of the paramedics was physically holding the rest of him down on the wheeled stretcher. “Over here,” she said, raising her voice. “I’ll take him.”

The old man looked at her, his terrified anguish on his deeply wrinkled face.

“I’m not going in there!” he screamed, a faint hint of an English accent in his voice. “Take me back outside, dammit!”

“I told you it’ll be dark outside soon,” one of the paramedics said. “Now just relax and we’ll get you all better.”

The LVN stood aside for the EMTs to get the patient into the exam room. The old man was still desperately trying to get off the stretcher.

“I suggest we strap him down,” one of them said before they transferred him to the wheeled ER bed. “He isn’t very strong, but he can still hurt himself pretty bad if he falls off.”

“I’ll hurt you, ya’ bastard!” A fleck of blood appeared on the old man’s chin. “Now let me go, dammit!” he cried. “You got no right to bring me here!”

“I think so, too,” the LVN said to the paramedic. “But not too tight. He looks like he’s had a bad time.” She gazed deeply into the old man’s eyes to see if they were dilating properly. “What’s your name, sir?”

“I want to be outside!”

“He wouldn’t tell us either,” the taller of the paramedics said. “We had to write him up as a conditional John Doe.”

The nurse just nodded.

The EMTs were as gentle as possible, but the LVN knew the elderly patient—who looked even older than she’d first thought under the bright lights—would have some pretty bad bruises from the handling. She picked up the phone and asked that an Emergency Room physician join her as soon as possible, before they all became too busy with the incoming Girl Scouts.

“Do you want us to stay until the doctor gets here?”

Securely strapped to the bed the old man just lay there breathing heavily, tears streaming from his eyes.

"No," the LVN said softly, reaching for a blanket. "He seems to be settling down now."

The paramedics hadn't been gone for more than thirty seconds when the doctor and the dietician showed up at the same time. The doctor peeled back the blankets and both of them carefully looked the patient over.

"He's severely dehydrated," the doctor said, checking the old man's pulse. "And he looks like he could use a good meal."

"I agree," the dietician said. "But he needs to be stabilized before he eats anything."

The ER physician nodded and gently brought the blankets up to the man's chin. "Start a ten percent dextrose IV, medium drip, and we'll check him in an hour." His head jerked toward the door at the sudden sound of wailing, a lot of it, in the hall outside. "That'll be those Girl Scouts," he said. "Better get out there."

"Let me out of here," the old man croaked. "I have to get out now! Please."

"You're not well, Mister . . . ?"

"Just let me go!"

"We'll do everything we can for you, Sir," the doctor said, motioning for the LVN to follow him into the hallway.

Before turning to join the staff working with the injured girls, the doctor leaned close to the LVN and jerked his head at the exam room.

"He's pretty bad off," he whispered so softly that she strained to hear over the noise the girls were making. "He won't last out the rest of the day. He reminds me of my father." He sighed deeply and blinked rapidly a few times. "My dad didn't like hospitals, either. Stay with him and make him as comfortable as you can, but let us know when he's gone because we'll need that room as soon as possible."

"What about the IV?"

The doctor could only nod as he turned to walk away.

"That poor old soul," she whispered in almost total silence as one of the Girl Scouts started screaming in the next exam room. "He doesn't deserve this."

Taking a few deep breaths, the LVN put a smile on her face as she walked back into the room where the old man still lay weeping.

"We'll get you fixed up in no time," she said, pulling a cabinet door open and looking for the IV solution the doctor had ordered. "But first we

need to get some fluids and calories in you.”

“You can’t,” the old man croaked. “Not anymore.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You can’t fix me up anymore,” he said softly, his voice raspy and dry. “No one here can do anything for me.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” she said noncommittally. “We help people get well all the time.”

“I’m dying,” the man said, sudden strength in his voice. “I’m not going to get well in here, no matter what you do to me.”

The LVN pulled an IV stand close and rigged up the infusion machine for the medium drip the doctor specified. Satisfied that everything was working properly, she turned to her patient.

“I just need to find a good vein on your arm, and—”

“Please,” the man suddenly whispered, near panic in his tone. “Please don’t stick me with that thing!”

“But we have to—”

“No! I just want to go outside! To get out of here!”

“But you’re very sick, this will make you feel better!”

“I’m dying and nothing you can do will make me feel better!” He strained against the straps and started moving from side to side as if trying to turn the bed over. “I have to . . . to go outside! Not die in this . . . in this place!”

Reaching for his left forearm, the LVN held back for a moment.

“You have to die outside?”

The old man locked eyes with her for a long, silent moment, and then drew a deep breath.

“If I tell you why, will you let me go?” he finally asked. “I vow on my life I won’t lie to you.”

The LVN couldn’t take her eyes from the old man’s face and the faint expression of hope among the wrinkles there.

“I—”

“How’s our patient?” the doctor suddenly asked from the doorway. He peered intently at the old man. “Did you get the IV started yet?”

“Just doing it now.” The LVN removed the clear plastic guard from the needle and focused on the old man’s arm again. “He was pretty upset there for awhile. But I’m having a hard time finding a site. There’s plenty of veins showing but they don’t look strong enough.”

“Well, do the best you can.” The doctor looked to his left down the hall at the sudden sound of screaming a few doors away. “I’ll be back to check on you later,” he said to the old man, raising his voice. “We’re kinda busy just now.”

When he was gone, the old man frowned at where the doctor had stood.

“He knows I’m dying,” he said. “He just wants this room.”

“Of course not!” The LVN hated herself for lying to the old man. “The doctor was just checking—”

“Why don’t you just give him what he wants and let me get out of here?”

“Sir!” The LVN closed her eyes and dropped into a nearby chair. “Doing that would violate every—”

“Even if I told you why?”

“Okay,” she said, drawing a deep breath and replacing the needle guard. “What’s so important about going outside that you’re willing to die to get there?”

“I . . .” Fresh tears streamed down his face. “I want to walk among the stars again.”

He was then silent for so long that the nurse thought he might have died, if she hadn’t been watching the slight rising and falling of the blanket that showed he was still breathing shallowly.

“I’m not sure I understand—”

“I’m a lot older than I look,” he said, as if she hadn’t uttered a word.

If he really was a lot older than he looked, she thought, he must be well past a hundred.

“How old are you?”

His eyes focused on a point in the distance that only he could see, and he whispered “I was born near Bristol, in England, in the year 1220. And I was only twelve when I watched a streak of light pass over my family’s house and come to Earth in the forest nearby.”

“I see.” The LVN slowly removed the needle guard again and came to her feet. “That sure is an interesting story,” she said softly, carefully, “but the doctor ordered this IV for you. I’ll make you feel a lot better.”

“Dammit, I vowed I wouldn’t lie to you, the way you and that damn doctor have been lying to me!”

He had her there.

"Okay," she said. "But you have to admit what you're saying is pretty farfetched. Can you prove it?"

The old man relaxed and closed his eyes, and began to speak.

"He's pretty bad off," he said, sounding exactly like the doctor. "He won't last out the rest of the day. He reminds me of my father. My dad didn't like hospitals, either. Stay with him and make him as comfortable as you can, but let us know when he's gone because we'll need that room as soon as possible."

The LVN frowned, trying to remember when she'd heard those words. Then her eyebrows shot up.

"How did you hear that from in here? I barely heard it, and I was standing right next to him when he said it!"

"The light I saw came from a spacecraft," the old man continued as if he hadn't heard her, that far-off expression coming into his haunted eyes again. "There were people in it, but not people like us. They were tall and slender and had big eyes, but they were people." He paused, lost in the memory, before continuing. "Something was wrong with their craft and they landed there to fix it. It took a few days and I got to know them. And when I asked them to take me along with them, they did." A slight smile made his face relax a bit. "Over time, they made me better than I was, with powerful new ears and eyes and they had machines that kept me young and healthy for a long, long time. In a lot of ways they made me more like them than like I had been. And they put something inside me that would let them track me, since I became more of a mascot to them—more of a pet—than a passenger or crew member. But you can't even imagine the kinds of things they taught me! And the places we went to."

Torn between placing the IV needle as ordered and humoring a dying old man with some pretty outlandish delusions, the LVN made a decision and replaced the needle guard. She draped the rubber tubing carefully over the top of the IV stand and turned off the infuser.

"Where did you go?" she asked in a near whisper. "When you left England?"

"To the galaxy," he said, his voice fading away. "To the stars."

He went silent again, and the nurse realized from the way his eyes were moving that he was seeing things she could only wonder about.

"But you got old anyway," The LVN eventually said, prompting him to continue.

“That started happening when I got homesick about a hundred years ago and asked them to bring me back,” he said, tears beginning to stream from his eyes again. “Everything about the Earth had changed so much from when I was a boy that I thought I wanted to see it change even more. And the changes I saw in that short hundred years were even more amazing in a lot of ways than anything I saw out in the galaxy! It made me so proud of my home planet.”

“But?”

“But I got old,” he agreed, his voice cracking on the last word. “I didn’t have access to the machines that kept me young. And now I’m dying. That’s why I have to get outside. Inside this building, they can’t detect my tracking signal and pick me up before it’s too late.”

“Are you saying you’ll live if you can just get outside?”

“I am.”

“But you were lying naked on the roof of a building for . . . only you know how long. Most of the afternoon, from what I understand. And no one came to pick you up.”

“It’s not like they’re coming from across town!” the old man snapped angrily. “You can’t even imagine how big the galaxy is!”

“Maybe I can’t, but I don’t believe you!” The LVN couldn’t stop her own anger from rising within her. “I don’t believe this is about you living! It’s about you wanting to die! You want me to believe this ludicrous alien abduction story just so I’ll help you commit suicide out in the cold. I’m a nurse, Mister . . . whatever your real name is. A nurse! We don’t help people die, sir, we try to help them live as long as possible!”

Instead of arguing further, the old man shuddered and grimaced in sudden agony.

“It’s starting,” he hissed through clenched teeth. “Please, please get me outside now!”

“But I don’t believe you!”

Obviously willing his frail old body under control, he regarded her closely. “That poor old soul.” he sighed in the nurse’s voice, “he doesn’t deserve this.”

Astounded, the LVN gazed at him for a long, silent moment.

“How did you hear me say that? It was so noisy out there and I know I didn’t say it out loud.”

He didn't say a word. Instead, he stared into her eyes, his shallow breath steadily becoming more and more labored. Finally, she couldn't take it anymore.

"If you get outside right now, you'll be really able to walk among the stars again?" she finally asked.

"Right now."

"Okay," she said, wiping tears from her face. "Let's go."

She pulled a white sheet from another cabinet and draped it over the old man.

"Be quiet and don't die on me before we get outside!" she snapped softly, just before covering his face. "This could cost me my job."

"I won't, and thank you."

Since she stood no chance of getting what appeared to be a cadaver—a dead body she would have had no business handling in the first place—out through the ER entrance, she turned the other way in the hall and headed for the nurse's lounge. A locked door there led to a small enclosed patio where medical staff and other personnel who couldn't shake the habit were allowed to smoke outside.

With everyone else, hopefully, working with the Girl Scouts, she figured she should be able to get him onto that patio without anyone seeing her.

At the door to the lounge, she heard the old man gurgling under the sheet and she recognized the sound of impending death.

"Hang on for just another minute," she said through clenched teeth. "Hang on!"

A sensor at the patio door read her ID code and the door clicked to show it was unlocked.

"Just a few more seconds," she said when she saw a fine red stain appearing on the sheet where the man's mouth was. "We're almost there."

She had to push the door open and drag the bed through.

It bounced over the threshold, and she was momentarily afraid the jarring had killed the old man when she no longer saw that the sheet showed whether or not he was breathing.

"We're here," she said, falling into one of the patio chairs and collapsing in tears and burying her face in her hands. "I hope you made it."

She didn't see what happened when a light so bright flashed on the patio that she detected it through tightly closed eyelids, but when she finally

opened her eyes and got them into focus the blood-stained sheet lay disheveled and limp on the bed.

And the old man was gone.

“Welcome home,” she murmured, gazing into the evening sky through freshly flowing tears. “Enjoy the stars.”

DUST LADEN

Ron Koppelberger

Spittle and streams of liquid seemed to pour from his mouth on the dust laden volume. He was sick and wondering if he would survive. The balance of epidemic and existence had finally caught up with him. He coughed and read the inscription, it said: "Closer to the wind the craft is driven by the hands of Neptune!" He sighed and wiped his nose. He guessed that there were only a few hundred thousand left alive, maybe less. The paragraph under the inscription read, "The Neptune android will return in glory and knowledge..." It had returned with a retro virus and death. His eyes blurred for a moment and he saw something ancient and unbidden, something that hated man and his invention. He prayed and an empty hunger filled his stomach. What was the point in going on? For a second the air cleared and all was normal again. The clock on the crumbling wall had moved backwards and his watch had stopped at 10:15 P.M. What had happened? Had some sort of gate opened? He stood and looked to the west, distant from his eyes lay fields of wheat. He was no longer ill and the path lay forward to the saffron endurance of a promise and horizons bidden by forever.

THE SAVIOR

Kevin L. Jones

How could this have happened? He had come to this world with only kindness and good intentions in his heart but instead he had brought death to the humans that he had sought to save. How could things have gone so terribly wrong? For decades he had monitored transmissions that had come from the Earth and it greatly saddened him that the people of that distant planet still lived with poverty, disease and war. These scourges had long since been eliminated on his planet and he thought it tragic that the earthlings should have to suffer so. He had petitioned his planet's high counsel to send ambassadors to the Earth and help the humans with their vastly superior science. His request had been denied out of hand. Centuries ago his people's Gods had decreed that they should have nothing whatsoever to do with anyone not of their own race. He had never had much use for the Gods. He thought them to be a pointless hold over from a less enlightened time. He had thought that it was ridiculous to let a whole race of people continue to suffer and die because of some ancient taboo. After much soul searching he had decided to defy the Gods and his people. He had appropriated an interstellar craft and had taken what equipment he had needed to bring the people of the Earth out of the darkness and into the light.

When he had landed outside of Los Angeles he had caused quite a panic. The earthling's military forces had converged upon him and had taken him prisoner. At first no one had believed that he had come to the Earth with good intentions. They had thought him to be some sort of a spy gathering data for the Earth's eventual invasion. After endless interrogations he had finally been allowed to speak with the leader of the Americans. He had convinced him that he only wanted to help and help he had.

Within a month of his arrival all disease had been wiped out. Then he had given the humans a means of producing a cheap, clean power source that had solved the world's energy crisis once and for all. When that had been accomplished he bestowed upon the earthlings a formula for a fertilizing agent that would make farming in the even most inhospitable regions possible. No one would ever have to go hungry again. These age old scourges having been eliminated, hatred had seemed to vanish from most

men's hearts and for the first time that anyone had been able to recall, there had not been even one war taking place anywhere on the face of the Earth. There had still been crime, of course, and some people could not let go of their hate. On several occasions fanatics and extremists had even tried to take his life but for the most part the Earth had rejoiced and he had been thought of as the planet's Savior.

Sometimes he had felt a twinge of sadness about what he had done. Having broken his people's most ancient and sacred law he could never go home again but when he had seen that he had given the hope of a better tomorrow to a people that had suffered terribly, he had known that he had made the right decision.

Just when it had looked like the Earth had been entering a golden age, everything that he had accomplished had turned to ashes. A new and terrible disease had spread across the globe, decimating the Earth's population. Soon he had discovered that he was responsible for the deadly virus that had killed the humans by the millions. He had inadvertently brought the world killing plague with him when he had arrived on Earth. He had caused a virgin soil epidemic that had all but extinguished life from the face of the planet. He was a brilliant scientist but no matter how hard he had tried he could find no way of curing the humans of the virus that was harmless to his people. As he wandered in despair through the silent city whose streets were clogged with the rotting corpses of the very people he had sought to save, he thought he could hear his people's Gods laughing at his arrogance. Who had he been to defy their laws? Now that it was far too late he finally realized that the Gods had known best and would always know best and that those that defied them would suffer a terrible fate.

BEST BUD

Matthew Wilson

I think there's something very wrong with my friend.

In the beginning he had a slight accent but has completely and competently eradicated it now. He's fitted in our little community like a piece into a pretty jigsaw.

Complete.

But he still doesn't like the things I like. Down the bar I pushed a bottle beneath his nose and he nearly passed out. Could his digestive system handle it?

He managed a smile and said he'd pass.

Our community has been more of a family, looking out for the elderly in harsh winters and barring teens during heat stroke summers who wished to smash our windows for fun. So it was inevitable we heard about the deaths as soon as they happened.

My friend had the nerve to attend their funerals, twice he was even pall bearer.

None will listen to me. No one wants the truth and of course, inevitably, the killings continue.

My fears made me break into his house but it was the garden where I found the escape pod buried beneath the rockery. He must have dragged it here from the nearby woodland, his crash site, and hid it from all prying eyes and twitching curtains.

No wonder he wanted this house so damn badly, paid ten times its true worth when it opened on the market. Its previous occupant met with a tragic accident. How fortunate. Come on guys, join the dots together. Open your eyes. Can they not see that he's nothing like us?

I get the feeling my friend knows as he watches me, always smiling.
Always knowing.

Dear God help me, I don't think my friend is like us at all.
I think he might be human.

GIRLS DON'T POOP

Thomas M. Malafarina

Inspired by a work of art, of the same title by artist Nunzio Barbera.

“What are little girls made of? Sugar and spice And everything nice, that's what little girls are made of.” – Mother Goose Rhyme

Four young boys leaned against a stone wall, the collars of their jackets turned up to fight off the biting autumn breeze. They watched the girls walking toward the front entrance of their school. This had become the group's daily lunchtime ritual since the start of school, regardless of the weather; they always found a way to strategically place themselves so they could watch all of the returning girls.

Girls, whom they formerly thought of as ugly, stupid or just plain goofy, suddenly started looking much better to them. Most of the girls had started sprouting breasts, their figures now forming enticing curves and the boys noticed; oh yes, they noticed in a big way.

A group of girls walked by, led by a pretty brunette. She was the head cheerleader and most popular girl in the ninth grade. The uninterested girls completely ignored the gawking boys which, although par for the course, still managed to anger one of the boys, Smitty.

“That snot-nose thinks she's better than everyone else,” he complained. “You know... Like she thinks her crap don't stink or something.”

“Maybe it doesn't,” Milton Weisman interjected in an off the cuff manner. “After all, if girls don't poop, how could it possibly stink?”

“What the heck did you just say, Mil-fart?” Smitty asked.

Milton replied, “I said girls don't poop. It's something my Mom would tell me when I was like four or five. I think it must have been one of those ‘sugar and spice and everything nice’ kind of things. You know, like ‘girls don't sweat, they perspire’. She used to always say girls were all like delicate flowers and didn't poop.”

“Well then, your mom must be right,” Smitty replied, chuckling, “Because she's a girl and if she expects you to believe that line of crap then she probably don't poop either, because she's obviously full of it.”

Milton ignored the comment. "Well, I thought about it a lot when I was a kid," he explained, "I figured she didn't say women don't poop... just girls. Like maybe they do something different when they're younger, then when they get older they go to dumper just like the rest of us, but it's after they are like seventeen or eighteen or something."

"That's got to be one of the stupidest things I have ever heard," Smitty said, then asked, "you mean to say, if I stopped one of these girls and ask her if she poops, she'd deny it?"

Milton laughed. "You probably wouldn't get the chance to find out. She'd probably punch you square in the kisser."

"I thought everything that was alive, pooped," John 'Pretty Boy' Martin chimed in. "If you eat, you gotta poop, right?" he asked reluctantly.

"That's not entirely true," Harold McClellan joined in. "He was also known as 'Brainiac' and 'The Bomar Brain.' It's true that all living organisms must get rid of waste products by some mechanism. Animals generally do this by a process referred to as excretion, what we refer to as poop. An amoeba, for example, might exocytose its waste products."

"Brainiac, what the heck are you talking about?" demanded Smitty. "Speak English, for God's sake."

"Well." Harold explained, "plants, for example, get rid of waste water by a process called transpiration but as I'm sure you know, the metabolism of plants is significantly different to that of animals or humans." Of course the other boys didn't know, nor for that matter did they really care.

"Jeesus!" Johnny interrupted. "None of us has the slightest idea what the heck you're talking about, Harr-old. You're killing us here."

"Girls ain't plants, Bomar!" Smitty interrupted. "They're people like us. That means they poop... right?"

Harold replied, "I'm quite certain they do, no matter what fabrication Milton's mother may have extolled."

"Look, you guys!" Milton interjected again, not being able to believe the direction the conversation had taken, or for that matter the fact it had become an actual conversation at all. "I told you it was just a goofy story."

"If girls don't poop," Johnny felt necessary to interject, "then explain how comes my sister stinks up the whole upstairs when she drops a load?"

Being a wise guy who couldn't miss an opportunity for a gag, Milton decided to keep the ridiculous conversation going and replied, as if knowing some mysterious secret, "well, your sister is like eighteen, right? She's past

the point of not pooping and now she's just like the rest of us. But I'll bet when she was a little girl she didn't stink the house up."

Johnny thought about that for a moment then replied, "yeah; you know... I think you're right. The real nasty stuff only started a year or two ago." Milton could not believe Johnny was falling for it. Johnny turned to the group and said. "Hey, maybe Weis-ass has something here."

"Yep, I do." Milton was trying hard not to burst into laughter. "And did you ever notice, when girls go to the bathroom, they always seem to go in groups? I'll bet that's so one or two of them can play lookout while the other's doing her thing, to make sure no boys are looking in to find out just what their secret might be. Then they switch and take turns watching the doors and windows."

"You are out of your stinkin' mind, Mil-fart!" Smitty snarled. "I can't even believe you expect us to fall for this. You're nuts!"

The boys continued their ridiculous debate for a few more minutes as the other children returned from lunch and the parade of girls continued to pass by.

An incredible looking blond girl with beautiful large blue eyes sashayed by and gave Johnny a coquettish glance before turning her gaze away.

"Whoa!" Johnny said. "Did you see the way Cindy Johnson just looked at me? She's the hottest girl in the school and she just checked me out like I was a pork chop at a picnic."

"More like a weenie on a stick," Smitty replied. "Easy, Johnny Pocket Rocket, no reason to get yourself all worked up over nothing. Cindy Johnson is as far from your reach as the moon."

Cindy Johnson and her mother had recently moved to their small Pennsylvania town from just outside New York City. Milton watched the interaction between the boys as they considered Cindy and got a great idea for keeping his gag going. "I'll tell you what," Milton suggested, "I have a way to get us proof, you know, about girls not pooping? What if I said I've an idea where we can all find out for sure?"

"What are you talking about?" said Smitty. "How you gonna get that kind of proof?"

"Well, you guys all know Cindy Johnson and probably wouldn't mind seeing her, you know... with her pants down, right?" They all looked at Milton with fascination. "Well you know she lives right next door to me.

Her first floor bathroom window's in the space between our houses. I've been thinking about maybe creeping over there after it gets dark and, you know, lookin' in between the curtains when she's in there."

Suddenly all four boys stopped talking; each appeared to be in a dream-like state, savoring the idea of secretly spying on Cindy Johnson while she was doing her most personal business. You could practically see the testosterone emanating from their bodies like a cloud of steam.

"Great idea! I think we should all come along and watch with you," Smitty suggested. "I don't trust you to tell us the truth."

Johnny added, with a dazed look of excited amazement, "Yeah... I agree with Smitty. We should all go."

"Don't be ridiculous," Harold interjected. "There's no way we could be successful with four of us lollygagging about with our tongues hanging out like jackals eying up a decaying carcass."

Smitty added, "Besides, horn-dog Johnny Rocket over there would get so worked up he might try and hump my leg or something."

Everyone laughed at that one. Then Johnny asked, "Yeah but if Mil-fart saw the "promised land" without us, he'd probably be so busy spankin' his monkey that he'd miss the best part of the show." Again they all laughed hysterically at the image.

Then Harold spoke once again. "Johnny does have a good point, I must agree. Although there's little chance of this succeeding with all of us present, stealth would be of the essence in a mission such as this. I've an alternate solution. Milton, didn't you say your Pa got one of those Polaroids recently?"

"Yeah, he did. It's really cool too. It's like one of the first Polaroids to take color pictures," Milton said proudly. Then he was struck with the realization of where this conversation was going and wished he'd kept his big mouth shut.

"Well," Harold said, "Suppose you were to sneak over and snap a picture of Cindy in action, so to speak, then you could bring us the proof."

The boys all looked at Harold approvingly. They liked the idea of getting to see a really personal nasty picture of Cindy Johnson and letting stupid Mil-fart take all the risk.

Smitty was the first to speak up. "That's a great idea, Bomar. What d'you say, Weis-ass? Are up to putting you money where your mouth is? Can you bring us the goods or what?"

Milton looked at his three friends, knowing he had just gotten himself into a bind and had to either put up or shut up. With a bit of uncertainty he agreed. "Ok. I can do that. Although I can't see in, I can still see her downstairs bathroom window from my bedroom. When I think the time's right I'll sneak over and get a shot." He really hoped he could delay the three long enough for them to forget the idea and he could skip the whole thing.

Smitty replied, "Sounds good to me, Mil-fart. Just make sure when we get to see the picture it's not all messed up because you were using it for wackin' material for two weeks."

For the next few nights, Milton sat at his bedroom window, hidden behind the curtain watching the Johnson house. On each of the three nights, between seven and eight, he saw the light come on in the downstairs power room and saw Cindy's long blond hair walking past the open blinds of the window to do her nightly business. First thing Sunday morning Milton checked the weather for the following week and saw it was going to be unseasonably mild for Monday night. That settled that, as far as he was concerned, Monday would be his 'go' night.

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Monday, shortly after noon, the four boys were in their familiar position leaning outside the school, once again checking out the girls returning from lunch. When Cindy Johnson walked by, the four of them practically salivated, each one imagining her with her in various stages of undress.

"Oh man Mil-fart!" Smitty said. "You've got to come through for us soon. This is killing me! I haven't been able to get images of Cindy on the can out of my mind. We need to see that picture. When are you going to take it?"

Milton hesitated for a moment then decided not to tell the boys he was planning on taking the picture that very evening. "Relax, guys. I said I'd get it and I will. But these things take proper time and planning. Maybe by the end of the week I should have something."

A collective groan of disappointment came from the group. Then Johnny said, "I think he already has the picture and is keeping it for himself." The group seemed to agree that it was a possibility.

Smitty said, "Check his palms and see if he has a build-up of calluses or maybe hair growing on them." They all laughed.

Then, Harold interjected, "I certainly hope you all realize that old adage about going blind or getting hairy palms is completely fictitious."

"Yeah, right." Johnny replied, "This coming from a guy with coke bottle glasses. Sheesh, Harold! You must have it worn down to a twig by now."

"Look." Milton said, "I promise I'll have it by the end of the week. I have a plan and am almost ready to go."

"Ok Two-ton." Smitty said. "Just make sure you show us as soon as the picture is ready." The other boys murmured almost silently, all imagining what amazing and intimate wonders the picture would hold. This had stopped being about their original silly discussion and had evolved into something much darker, much filthier and much more sinister.

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Milton looked at the clock and saw it was seven o'clock; time to get ready. He put on his warm dark coat, black knit cap and dark gloves, grabbed his father's Polaroid camera from his study and went out the back door, sneaking out the side gate and over to take his position. He'd picked up an old empty crate from his back yard, which he planned on using to stand on in order to get the best shot.

As Milton stood, teetering on the crate next to the window, he felt the cold disturbing breeze blowing between the houses and once again cursed himself for getting involved in such a ridiculous scheme. Fortunately for him he didn't have long to wait. Without warning, the light to the powder room went on and he saw Cindy enter just before he ducked down to avoid her seeing him as she passed the window.

He waited to the count of five then summoned the courage to take a peek inside. He could not believe his eyes. Gorgeous Cindy, one of the most beautiful girls in his class, was leaning over the toilet, elbows resting on the closed cloth-covered lid. But that was not the most amazing thing. She stood bent over with her skirt and panties down around her ankles, her long, lean legs leading up to her naked backside, which was arched upward toward the ceiling. His breath caught in his throat and he stared in awe at a

view he had only ever dared to imagine previously. He had never before seen such a beautiful sight in his young life.

Then suddenly everything about his glorious view of Cindy changed for the worst. Strange vine-like tentacles began to emerge from between the spreading cheeks of her backside and whipped wildly through the air. Milton counted over five of them. They seemed to be a cross between plant life and human, their flesh a mixture of tan and green colors. They also had fine filament-like hairs growing all along their length. He saw that the ends appeared to be human-like mouths with hundreds of tiny teeth. The mouths opened simultaneously and a fine greenish pink gaseous substance seemed to fly out into the air and slowly dissipate to nothingness.

The window to the powder room was open slightly and Milton could detect a pleasant aroma similar to plant-life or perhaps a fragrant flower of some sort. He was mesmerized by the sight and was shocked to realize what started out as a juvenile prank had somehow turned out to be true.

As he brought the Polaroid camera and prepared to snap the picture he was pulled backward off the box and fell hard, flat on his back in the grass, the wind immediately knocked out of him. The camera fell from his hand as he struggled to get to his feet. When he was on his knees he looked up and saw Cindy's mother looking down at him, holding a baseball bat firmly in her hands. He could not believe the angry, almost savage look in her eyes. He recalled how she had always been an attractive woman and, in Milton's opinion, she had been pretty hot for a mom. But now, any trace of her original beauty was long gone, replaced by a fiery anger so menacing she terrified Milton into paralysis.

"What do you think you're doing here?" She said with a voice no longer motherly, but almost witch-like, the voice of an evil old crone. "Are you spying on my little Cindy, you... you... pervert? Is that what you're doing?" She looked down at him and saw the fallen camera and the obvious erection in his jeans and understood for sure.

"I... I... I..." Milton stuttered. "I... wasn't... doing... nothin!" His pleas fell upon deaf ears. The woman was too mad with rage and he realized she would never consider listening to anything he might say. Before he had a chance try to talk his way out of his predicament, he felt a tremendous pain shoot through his skull as Mrs. Johnson brought the baseball bat down on the side of his head. Then with a rush of agonizing pain, everything suddenly went black.

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When Milton eventually regained consciousness he slowly opened his eyes to discover he was in a cellar with a dirt floor, seated on a wooden chair, his hands and legs tied securely to the chair with clothesline. Mrs. Johnson sat directly across from him on another chair with the baseball bat still in her hands. She raised and lowered the bat into the palm of her hand as if deciding whether or not to crush his skull. Cindy stood coyly behind her mother, watching him with a mix of pretentious shyness and an outward sensuality.

"Why were you spying on my daughter, you sick degenerate?" Mrs. Johnson shouted, "Tell me now and things might go a bit easier for you. Otherwise I cannot guarantee what might happen to you." The woman was obviously crazy and she scared Milton. His head still ached with pain. He didn't really believe the woman would let him go without further punishment but he hoped he could at least minimize whatever the consequences might be. He was especially concerned with what, if anything, Mrs. Johnson would say to his parents. He imagined his mother screaming hysterically when learning her precious Milton was nothing more than a degenerate peeping Tom.

He could feel hot tears streaming down his cheeks and his breath was hitching in his chest as he tried to speak. "I... I... wasn't spying... I mean... I w... I mean... it's because of the guys... my friends... at school."

"Maybe I need to smack you up alongside of your head a few more times with this bat to knock some sense into you. Is that what I need to do, boy?" Mrs. Johnson demanded, looking more insane than ever. And the way she called him "boy" made Milton feel very uncomfortable, like she thought of him as something less than a boy; something less than human.

"No... no... please don't," Milton pleaded. Then he took a deep breath and told her the entire twisted story from the beginning.

"Hummm." Mrs. Johnson said looking somewhat intrigued. She turned and said something to Cindy which he couldn't hear. They both smiled as if sharing a secret then Mrs. Johnson asked him, "Tell me, boy, what exactly did you see when you looked through the window?"

Milton did his best to lie and sound convincing in the process."I... I didn't see nothin'... the curtain was in the way... honest Mrs. Johnson."

"He's lying, Momma," Cindy said. "He saw me, I'm sure of it. He saw me... you know... flower." She tried to appear embarrassed yet all the while projecting an obviously sexually charged hunger even a blind man could not help but see.

"Tell me, boy, do you understand what was happening when you looked through that window at my little girl?" Mrs. Johnson demanded. "Do you know what you really saw?"

With a shaky tear-filled voice he struggled to say, "Well... I guess I saw... you know... what my Mom... told me about. Cindy didn't go to the bathroom... like I thought she should... she was doing something else... flowering... I guess she called it."

Mrs. Johnson stood up from her chair and slowly walked over toward Milton, shaking her head disapprovingly. "Well, son, I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but your mother may have given you some very bad information. Or maybe when she told you what she did, you may have been too young to understand what she was trying to tell you. I don't know and I don't really care. You see, girls actually do go relieve themselves or poop, as you call it. In fact, all human girls go to the bathroom and get rid of their waste just like every human boy does. Granted, the plumbing might be a bit different but the results are the same."

"But I saw Cindy... and all of those slimy... snaky things."

"I'm sorry to say you did see exactly what it was you thought you saw and what I feared you may have seen," Mrs. Johnson replied, sounding somewhat resigned. "Because, you see, here is the real ironic part of this whole situation. Unfortunately for you, of all the girls in all of the families in this entire town, you made the fatal mistake of choosing the one non-human family to use for your ridiculous experiment. It sounds to me, like you just had some of the worst luck in your miserable young life."

"Whaa... what did you mean... by not human?" he asked in horror, finally realizing the finality of his situation.

"It doesn't really matter what we are, does it, boy?" she said. "Since you've found out our little secret we can't let such a thing stand, now can we?!"

"Please... please just let me go," he pleaded. "I promise I won't tell anyone. I swear I won't."

"You're certainly right about that, boy. You won't be telling anyone anything. I can guarantee that." She nodded to her daughter and they both

slowly walked over and stood directly in front of Milton's chair and bent forward, leaning toward him, opening their mouths incredibly wide. Then their lower jaws seemed to somehow drop down impossibly far, allowing their mouths to open to an unbelievable size. Both Cindy and her mother's eyes rolled up into their heads as if they were going into some sort of trance anticipating extreme pleasure. Milton looked in terror into the two massive black openings which seemed to erupt in their faces as long, tan and green slimy tentacles began to slowly emerge from the darkness.

He no longer smelled the pleasant floral fragrance as he had earlier at the window, but instead there was a vile stench of rotting meat and decomposing vegetation. The ends of the long reaching vine-like appendages opened up and he once again saw the hideous mouths at the ends with hundreds of small pointy teeth. Horrified, Milton opened his mouth to scream for help, but before he could, with the speed of a snake, one of the hideous dancing tendrils opened up its mouth wide and shot across the distance, latching onto Milton's mouth, cutting off his attempted cry.

Within a split second, several of the gyrating appendages latched onto his face, neck and chest. Then the horrible tentacle around his mouth went down into his throat with lightning speed. Milton thought the pain couldn't possibly get any worse but then he felt something bursting inside his stomach, ripping though his outer flesh with a searing pain. Then suddenly all pain ceased as his vision went black and Milton finally died; his body eventually to be completely consumed.

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Two weeks later the three remaining friends were waiting outside the school for the girls to return from lunch as they had done weeks earlier. They had changed their routine as they were each in his own way dealing with what might have possibly happened to Milton.

During that time the three friends had individually wondered if perhaps Milton had gotten into some kind of trouble at the Johnson's house trying to take Cindy's picture, but there was no evidence of that. They didn't know if the dare they had made with Milton had anything to do with his disappearance, but they had all chosen not to tempt fate and not discuss it ever again.

They never agreed to be silent; instead they each chose to simply forget about it. After all, if they told anyone about it, they would only find themselves in trouble and for what purpose? It wouldn't bring Milton back.

Today was the first time the three survivors had met at their old haunt and there was an awkward silence as they stood quietly. In the past they could always count on Milton to break any such stillness with one of his goofy jokes, but there would be no jokes today.

Milton's parents had reported him missing two weeks earlier, when his mother returned home to discover he was not there and when he hadn't come back by midnight. His father had cut his business trip short to be by his wife's side.

Police had questioned the neighbors around the Weisman's house and no one had reported seeing Milton anywhere. The police had begun to wonder if perhaps Milton had run away, but his parents insisted it wasn't possible.

As the trio stood silently, not really paying attention to the girls walking by as this activity seemed less fun to do without Milton's smart comments; they heard someone calling "Hi boys!" They looked up and saw the lovely Cindy Johnson, the subject of many of their late night fantasies standing directly in front of them.

"I'm really sorry to hear about your friend Milton," she said with a contrived somber tone. "He lived right next door to me, but I really never got a chance to get to know him. I hope they find out where he's gone soon. Anyway, I gotta go now." She walked away from the boys with an enticing wiggle in her backside.

"Wow!" Smitty said. "That Cindy Johnson is one hot number."

Harold just stood nodding his head, captivated.

Johnny added, "Her perfume smells so good, doesn't it? ... kind of like flowers."

THE LAST DAY

Jeff Jones

They're getting nearer. The explosions and weapon's fire is growing louder as they rampage their way through the city, killing and burning as they go. The screams and yells are getting louder and more distinct too. Soon I might even be able to recognise individual voices of friends, neighbours and family as they cry out in pain or plead for their lives. Then it'll be my turn.

I'm not a brave person. If I was I guess I'd be out there fighting alongside some of the others even though they know it's futile. The enemy is too strong, both in numerical advantage and technology. The final outcome is inevitable, only the timing of our demise is uncertain.

I'm not a coward, either. When my time comes I won't beg for mercy, not that I'd receive any; they're a ruthless and cold-hearted enemy, devoid of compassion.

Another explosion, just down the street I think, though it's hard to be sure. I could go to the window and look out, but what would be the point? Whether they're close or not, they'll soon be here. Besides, I might get spotted and fired upon. There's no point tempting fate. My life will soon be over I know that, but there's nothing to be gained by putting myself in unnecessary danger. Every moment that remains to me is precious and should be savoured as the gift it is.

I sit back down in my favourite chair and assume a comfortable position. Beneath me the chair begins to mould around my body, providing support. My posture is terrible and would no doubt give me terrible back ache tomorrow, if I had a tomorrow, but I don't. I might as well be comfortable in whatever time I have remaining.

I wave my right hand at the overhead lights and they gradually begin to dim. I consider keeping some soft lighting on, but decide against it. The darkness is more in keeping with my mood. Perhaps the aliens will just run on by when they don't see any lights. It's a stupid thought, but an oddly comforting one.

My gaze falls on the public information portal sitting quietly in the corner and I wonder whether it's worth turning it on. Would anybody still be alive there and even if they were, would they bother trying to broadcast?

It seems unlikely. There will be none of us left alive soon and I doubt the enemy will be interested in viewing any of our recordings.

Another explosion, much closer this time, perhaps just a couple of blocks away, followed by weapon fire and a series of piercing screams that chill me to the bone. I instinctively cower down, the chair automatically reconfiguring to take account of my new posture. Was that the pitiful scream of another family wiped from the face of the planet?

My body is shaking violently as my own time draws near. I don't want to die; I've so much more I want to achieve, but then I guess every scientist would say that.

I'd always believed that there were other life forms out there; it would have been arrogant to think we were alone in the universe. So we went looking for them. First we built rockets that could take us to the moon and then we built probes and spaceships that were capable of unmanned deep space exploration and sent them off to the four corners of the universe. It was almost inevitable that sooner or later one of them would run into an alien life-force.

It was the messages that were our undoing, though. Messages of peace and greeting sent on pulse waves throughout the universe to anyone capable of hearing them. For months we heard nothing and even some of my more optimistic colleagues began to believe that perhaps there was nobody out there after all. Then one day completely out of the blue, we received a response. We couldn't understand what they were saying, of course, probably no more than they could understand us, but it was a definite response.

World leaders, academics and scientists all over the planet began to celebrate the discovery. More and more information about ourselves, including our location, was sent in pulse waves. Slowly, very slowly we began to decipher each other's language.

The responses we received were friendly, yet vague and told us very little about the senders. This gave me cause for alarm as the exchange of knowledge and information seemed excessively one-sided. It was naive of us to think that every race we came into contact with would be benign and friendly and I began to urge caution. There were others who also thought this way, most notably in the military, but our voices were not listened to. Instead we continued to ply them with information and a roadmap to our planet hoping they would come - and come they did.

Whilst they continued to send us messages of peace, their war fleet was heading through space towards our defenceless little planet. By the time anyone realised what was happening they had overwhelmed our insignificant orbital defences and commenced bombarding our cities from space. Then the ground invasion began.

Several more explosions outside, the last of them a big one that makes the building in which I live reverberate. Several bursts of what I take to be small arms fire. The noise is strange and I assume these are the weapons used by the aliens. I wonder if there is anyone left alive out there fighting back or whether now it's just a case of the invaders wandering from building to building, exterminating us.

My breath catches in my throat when I hear running footsteps outside followed by shooting; they are almost here. The corridor outside is filled with noise, people screaming and crying and the incessant drone of weapons. I briefly consider going outside to see if I can help hide someone, anyone, but what would be the point? All I'd be doing is delaying the inevitable.

I walk to the small table and pick up a picture of my partner and little ones. They're all dead, killed in the opening barrage from orbit when their school was destroyed. I tell myself that their deaths were quick, that they didn't suffer, but I don't know that for sure. I smile down at their grinning faces as a tear drops onto the picture, making it momentarily shimmer before its molecular structure reconfigures. I'll be with you soon.

Placing the picture gently back down, I walk over to the window and stare out at a city on fire, no longer caring whether I'm spotted or not. My life expectancy can probably now be measured in mere moments, judging by the noise outside.

It is such a waste. The things we could have potentially learned from each other were probably limitless. Instead they've come here to take what they want and destroy what they don't. I wonder whether they are the only race out there or whether there are others who would have come in peace. Were we just unlucky that our first foray into space just happened to run into the universe's only belligerent people? In one of their messages the aliens had said that there were many races who they'd come into contact with, but they could have been lying. They lied about being our friends, after all. Perhaps there had been other friendly races and they've all been destroyed by these aliens.

What is their motivation for attacking us? Are they just a naturally belligerent race for whom death and destruction is a way of life or did they see us as a threat? Perhaps there was another reason. Maybe their planet is dying from neglect or exploitation and they are seeking a new home. I'd like to know but I guess I never will.

Voices outside in the corridor, one I understand, several I don't. I can now virtually read their crude language but I still can't understand them when they speak. More weapon fire and the one voice I could understand is brutally extinguished as it pleaded for its life.

They are outside my door now, no doubt preparing to break it down. I hurry away from the window, retrieve the picture of my family and clasp it close to my chest. I have just moments to live: a blink of an eye in the history of the universe.

I have just one wish before they kill me and that is to see their faces. Not just out of some bravado of wanting to stare my executioner in the eye although that is part of it, but just because I want to know what these aliens look like. There has been much conjecture by my colleagues about this. Some say they are little green or grey men with dome shaped heads and large black eyes. Others say they will be almost reptilian in appearance. Most, however, agree that in all likelihood they are not that dissimilar to us, with two eyes, two ears and two legs. It would be nice to know.

The door blows in amongst a choking plume of dust and I instinctively close my eyes and turn away. Several sharp pains erupt in my chest and I find myself falling. I hit the floor hard, the wind knocked from my lungs. Several shapes are moving to surround me, staring down at me from behind what appear to be masks. They are pointing weapons at me. I am bleeding from several places in the chest.

They say something I don't understand and then one of them raises a hand and lifts off his mask. I gasp as I stare at the face of the alien. We were right; they are like us in many ways. So this is what our conquerors look like. This is a human.

The unmasked human says something to a comrade who in turn raises his weapon. It looks like...

SIBLINGS

Lee Clark Zumpe

It began with a splash of crimson across the linoleum.

Eric staggered, teetered backwards a few steps as his eyes grew wide. His mouth dropped open and his lower lip quivered. He whimpered as he watched the blood spurt from the deep, frowning gash sliced across the palm of his hand. Shock and morbid fascination delayed the first wave of pain for a few precious seconds.

He stared at his brother Wayne in utter disbelief.

Wayne glared back at him, a malign little smirk uncoiling across his face.

“I know you’re in there,” he gloated. “Did you really think I wouldn’t be able to figure it out?” His eyes were wide and wild, his face red with rage. His fingers curled so tightly about the switchblade that his knuckles had turned white. “Now, where’s my brother?”

“Wayne,” Eric stuttered as he watched his brother gloat. Blood surged down his arm and splattered on the floor. “What are you talking about – it’s me!”

“Don’t even try that bullshit with me anymore!” Wayne lunged forward, thrusting the blade toward Eric’s midsection. Eric reacted just in time, sidestepping the attack. He managed to wedge a foot between his brother’s legs and sent him tumbling to the floor. Wayne, embarrassed and shaken, scrambled back to his feet quickly. “What have you done with him? Where is he?”

“What’s gotten into you?” Eric cautiously pulled his shirt over his head, then wrapped it around his hand awkwardly. “Look at me... it’s me: Eric.”

“No... no, I don’t think so,” Wayne said, circling the other insidiously. “You may look like Wayne, but you ain’t him. You’re just wearing his skin!”

Eric froze. Wayne had been having some problems recently, particularly after their most recent move; but he never expected anything like this. The poor guy had really snapped this time. He had completely lost touch with reality.

Eric suspected that all those hours Wayne spent watching television probably led to this somehow.

“Wayne,” Eric said, looking around the tiny apartment, trying to find something with which he could defend himself, “you’ve got to calm down. Try to focus. I am your brother...”

“You are not! You’re an alien and you’ve kidnapped my brother and stolen his flesh!”

“Wayne, we’ve got to get you some help,” Eric said as softly as he could. “You’re going to be all right... we just need to get you some help.”

“I’ll be just fine when you tell me where Eric is!”

Wayne charged again, and this time Eric could not avoid him. The sudden loss of blood had weakened him and he could not overcome his brother. Wayne’s blade tore into his face, ripping a gash straight across his forehead. They tumbled to the floor, wrestling.

Wayne somehow got his fingernails beneath Eric’s face and he pulled as hard as he could. The flesh peeled back, like the husk of an ear of corn.

“Damn, Wayne!” Eric yelled. “Look what you’ve done!” The alien finally summoned up the strength to toss his brother aside. “Now I’ll have to find a new earth suit.”

“Oh shit...” Wayne said, grimacing. Seeing the scales, the three pairs of purple eyes; seeing the tiny horns protruding from the exoskeleton induced Wayne’s memory to flood back all at once. It was his brother, after all.

“You and your damn memory lapses,” Eric said, referring to the black-outs his brother often experienced after traveling through a series of worm-hole exchanges. “I swear, we’ll never be able to get this galaxy prepared for assimilation if you keep wigging out on me like that.”

“Uh,” Wayne said, watching Eric try to press his tattered face back into place. He noticed the switchblade in his hand and winced. “Sorry about that, Eric. Won’t happen again...”

CHRISTMAS VACATION

Tammy A. Branom

My Christmas Vacation
By Joy Gracie
Mrs. Miller 2nd Grade

For my Christmas vacation, I got to really, really meet Santa Claus. No one believes me, but it's true. I swear it! In the middle of the night on Christmas Eve, I was woke up by this jingling noise. At first I thought it was Daddy's keys, so I snuck out to maybe catch him putting stuff under the tree like my friend Paula says her dad does. But, instead of the tree and Daddy, there was nothing. I could see OUTSIDE RIGHT THROUGH THE WALL! And the jingling kept getting louder and louder. Then the whole room got sort of blurry-looking and there was this white, smoky shape. At first, I was scared, but then I could see his big, shiny black eyes. Even though he was kind of skinny, he had on a red suit. Well, it was sort of red. But, I knew it was Santa! I ran out yelling, "Santa! Santa!" and he turned to me and put his finger to his lips and said, "Shhhhhh." So, I did what he said and was quiet. I didn't want him to not leave me any presents under the tree. He smiled at me and patted my head and then I got very sleepy. Next, I watched Santa drift from the floor and right out the ceiling, jingling all the way! After that, the tree came back all lit up and there were lots of gifts all over the floor. The next thing I knew, I heard more jingles and there was Daddy standing over me, waking me up. I had fallen asleep under the tree with all the stuff Santa left. Now, I know for sure Santa brings presents and not Daddy and Mommy. I saw Santa Claus for real! It was the best Christmas ever!

THE COLONY

Brian Barnett

“Why, Mom? Why do they keep attacking each other?” the boy asked as he stared closely at his colony. He watched the tiny black dots scurrying around. “This is getting really annoying.”

“Well, sometimes they feel threatened. Sometimes they defend their young. And sometimes, well I guess, sometimes they just get overcrowded, which causes them to be territorial. And then, I’d say that they feel compelled to hurt one another.”

“I sure wish they would stop it. Sometimes I wish I could just clean them all out and start all over.”

“Again?”

“Oh, can I, Mom? Please?”

“We’ll see. Your dad wants you to learn a bit of responsibility. You can’t just keep scrapping things that you don’t understand and cannot control. You have to learn how to properly provide for them and to occasionally help them if they need it. One day when you have more responsibilities, you’ll thank us for that lesson.”

The boy sighed. “I guess.”

A scenario flashed through his head of what would happen if he “accidentally” destroyed the orb that contained his bustling colony. No doubt, his parents would never fall for it. He reluctantly uncoiled his tentacle from the orb and huffed.

“Jeez, when will dad be home? I really am bored of humans. All they ever do is eat, sleep and die anyway. I just want to start over one last time. Then I promise that I won’t ask for anything else.”

“We’ll see what he says, dear. We’ll see.”

SOFT TISSUE

Neil Leckman

I was traveling across a part of the state that was sparsely populated, only a few small towns along my route. Mom and pop grocery store/post office/police stations with a tiny cluster of businesses usually composed the downtown area, with distant ranches composing the main population. I had just finished a nice stretch of flat empty road, the kind that even lack vegetation of any height, just low scrub and dirt, and was running low on gas. Hopefully the next town had a gas station where I could fill up. I slowed way down when I saw the reduced speed limit sign, because I don't want to be some financing option for a backwater sheriff's new car. Coming over the low hill into the town something seemed off a bit, even small towns have activity on a Saturday morning, and there wasn't a soul in sight. There was a gas station ahead called Phil's, a typical gas station/post office/police station. It appeared to be open so I pulled up to the pumps. The first thing I noticed there were no credit card slots, or self serve pump options, the pumps look like they were throwbacks to the 1970's, just a nozzle locked into place on the side of the pump by a slide handle. Standing there, I looked towards the station expecting somebody to come out and help me. While I stood there waiting I looked around at the town and was a little disconcerted by the complete lack of any sound or activity. Finally I walked over to the grimy dust coated glass door that led into the station and walked inside. It was stifling hot inside and nobody stood at the little register that was surrounded by locked cabinets full of cigarettes.

"Hello, could I get somebody to help me turn on pump number two?"

Complete silence answered my question, muted by the stifling heat. I walked over to the cooler to grab something cold to drink while I waited and because I was beginning to sweat in the heat. As I got closer the first thing I noticed was the smell, the gagging funk of dairy products gone bad and something else that was so bad my eyes began to water. It was a standing cooler with sliding doors and lights were flickering, making it hard to see inside the case. Close up I could see that ice cream had melted out of the cartons, flowing over the items beneath and it happened long enough ago that it was covered with a dark green and brown mold. Mold that was so old that it had grown stalks with fertile pods, full of spores hanging from

the tips, ripe and ready to burst. In the case next to the freezer a package of hotdogs had burst open, exposing the now shriveled, dry contents also covered in a dense yellow mold. Milk cartons had burst as they got hot and the pressure from the contents going bad finally broken the seams. Along the floor with a viscous thick brownish pool of liquid on top, thoroughly soaked in the goo, was a pair of jeans, and a plaid shirt. Two shoes leaned a kilter against the cooler, a dirty white sock draped inside. A Timex watch, face down, seemed oddly out of place in the middle of the puddle. I started to get a creepy feeling and even though it had to be almost 100 degrees inside the store a chill ran down the back of my neck, leaving a trail of goose bumps that ran down my arms, making the hair there stand on end.

"Hello, is there anybody here?" I called out and the silence seemed to eat the sound, muting it. There was a glass door that separated the store from the post office portion of the building so I slowly opened it and walked in. A small desk with a postal scale and several rows of PO boxes was all that made up the post office, not untypical for a town of this size. Behind the desk, In front of a swinging door was a puddle of that strange liquid, with clothes and shoes, just like the store. There was a sweet sour smell of rot in the air but it was curious that there was no mold of any kind growing on either puddles. Some letters were scattered on the floor, several were covered with the thick liquid. In the back of my mind a crazy thought was forming. The police station was next door, but wasn't directly connected to the post office so I walked out the glass front door and went over to the main entrance to the tiny police station. Obviously crime wasn't a big concern in a town this size, so there was only one vehicle parked out front and it was more than ten years old. I noticed that the driver's side door was open and once again I saw that same display of clothes and goo. What could that possibly mean? I looked up at the empty buildings across the street and listened to the lonely howl of the wind as it blew a couple of tumbleweeds down the road.

I walked into the station and stood in the middle of a room with three large oak desks, one obviously for a dispatcher, with an old dispatch radio, probably an antique, sitting in the middle of the desk. The other two desks were obviously for the officers that worked there and one look like it sat unused for the most part. Papers were scattered around the room on the floor and in two other places were those same puddles, except one also had keys, a gun and a sheriff's hat lying mixed in. On the desk that looked

unused sat a large wooden crate with the word “Tanna” burned into the side, below that it said “Live Specimens”. There was an odd company logo; it looked like a type of bug I had never seen before, dragonfly wings on a spider with a scorpion’s tail. “*Science’s answer to natural pest control*” was the slogan under the emblem. The idea surfaced in the back of my mind, maybe something had turned everybody into puddles of goo. Obviously I was a victim of too much television. Everybody knows that there are too many bones to leave nothing but clear liquid, not counting hair, nails, etc. So the question still remained, what were the puddles scattered everywhere with clothes in them and where was everyone?

Outside I stood looking around for any other clues as to what might have happened here, but there was nothing I could see that helped. The gas pump still remained locked and unless I could find another pump or the key I was going to be stuck there. My cell phone didn’t show any service here, which quite frankly, given the Mayberry feel of the place, didn’t surprise me. I probably had four or five hours until it started to get dark, so I had time to find a solution to my problem. I turned and walked towards the main part of downtown, which was only three blocks long. There was an old movie theater in my left and a hardware store on my right. I figured the odds of someone being in the hardware store were better so I headed in that direction.

For the most part the downtown area seemed to be completely empty of people, except for the man I found dying in an alley off of Main Street. He was propped up against a dumpster in obvious pain; next to him was a large cardboard carton that must have served as his home on cold nights. There were a couple of much worn dirty blankets lying partially exposed next to him. I walked over to see if he might be able to tell me where everyone was. When I got closer I decided it might be better to just keep my distance.

“Excuse me, mister, but do you have any idea where everybody went? I can’t seem to find a soul anywhere.”

A sore by his mouth oozed a viscous yellow fluid as his lips moved, rivulets forming lumpy trails as they dropped off of his chin, making it almost impossible for him to speak. Reaching up with his right hand he grabbed my pant leg pulling me, closer than I wanted to be and faintly whispered two words, “Lake Tanna”. He took one last breath and died,

staring at me accusingly. What did that mean? I couldn't remember ever hearing about any lake nearby called Tanna.

The skin around his mouth curled back, exposing a death grin of rotted gums and yellowed teeth. The eyes sank back into their sockets and then began to shrivel up as some virus ate the flesh. They stared in an odd way as they flattened out and then vanished into his skull. The smell was worse than anything I'd ever experienced before, bringing the taste of hot vomit to the back of my throat. That's when I noticed the twin marks on the victim's throat. Raised ridged bite marks, side by side, with a tiny trickle of yellow fluid oozing from them. I turned and ran like Hell back to my car, hopped inside and burned rubber because this wasn't anyplace I wanted to stay long. Looking back I saw something dark, like a cloud rise up into the afternoon sky, then settle back down, waiting for the next unwary traveler.

THE CHOICE

Jeff Jones

“How long do we have, Jack?”

“Best estimate, Prime Minister, around forty-five minutes if it maintains its current velocity and trajectory.”

Prime Minister Neville Roberts shot a worried look at his Chief Aide, Jack Warner, as his security team continued to usher him into Haven 1, the reinforced command and control bunker deep beneath Downing Street. Originally built to house the prime minister, the armed forces chiefs and other key personnel in the event of a nuclear war, it was now intended to provide a safe retreat in the event of a serious terrorist attack or natural disaster. The events rapidly unfolding around Prime Minister Roberts fell into neither category yet the potential danger was still very real.

The prime minister’s chief of security waved his key pass in front of the elevator sensor and the doors whooshed open. The prime minister nodded at the two soldiers stationed outside as they snapped smartly to attention and then stepped inside, followed by his entourage. Another wave of the key pass and they were soon descending the fourteen levels to the command centre.

“Why wasn’t I informed about this danger earlier, Jack?”

“When NORAD first began tracking the object, they were convinced that it was a meteor and other agencies, including our own, concurred,” the chief aide replied.

“And nobody thought that the prime minister might like to know that a huge meteor one that could potentially destroy the entire planet, was heading our way?”

“With all due respect, Prime Minister, every year NORAD, NASA and our own agencies track over 200 meteors which are classed as ‘near misses’, some of them potential planet killers. If we were to tell you about all of them, sir, you wouldn’t get anything else done.”

“I think in future, Jack I’d like to be the judge of that.”

“Duly noted, Prime Minister,” replied Jack, smiling wryly.

“That’s if there is a later on. Anyway, what makes everyone so sure that this isn’t a meteor?”

“Meteors don't change direction, sir, and this one has,” replied Brian Marshall, the Defence Secretary, standing alongside him.

“So it's definitely a ship of some kind?” said Roberts, turning to face his Defence Secretary.

“Yes, Prime Minister; several in fact.”

“How many exactly?”

“Six ships, sir. The other five are a little way behind the lead one. It took NASA and the others a while to spot the others, which is why they initially thought it was a solitary meteor.”

Prime Minister Roberts opened his mouth to say something when the elevator jolted to a halt. The doors whooshed open and after two of his security team had exited the elevator and taken up positions either side of the doors, the prime minister stepped out into the clandestine world of Haven 1. An anonymous voice to the right announced the prime minister's arrival and everybody immediately stood and turned to face him, the military personnel present coming to attention and saluting.

“Please carry on,” said the prime minister, smiling warmly. He knew that it was vital that he presented an image of calm confidence and displayed no hint of the inner turmoil and self-doubt gnawing away at his insides. This was his third term in office and his time in Number 10 was rapidly coming to a close. His premiership had been steady if unremarkable; this was going to be the first real test of his administration and the world would be watching and judging him. His enemies both at home and abroad would be searching for any sign of weakness they could exploit. Throughout his long spell in government he had yearned for that one event, that one moment that would single him out for greatness in history. This he knew was probably his moment. He had to get it right.

He took a few seconds to take in the sight before him. Row upon row of computer screens adorned the walls, whilst their civilian operators frantically monitored and analysed readouts and spoke to unseen colleagues through their headsets. Directly in front of him was a huge screen with a flat panorama of the world displayed upon it.

“Prime Minister, I recommend that we put all tactical nuclear forces on the highest alert with immediate effect.”

Roberts looked at the man who had spoken, General Carter, his Chief of Staff and the man in command of the British armed forces. Carter was a giant of a man, both in terms of his stature and his popularity within the

military, and had served the previous administration in a long and distinguished career. He was what the Americans called a hawk and like most of the military, always seemed to be spoiling for a fight and Prime Minister Roberts could see why he had a reputation as being somewhat intimidating.

“We don't even know that they're hostile, Prime Minister. If we arm our weapons now we could send out the wrong signal to what could be a peaceful delegation.” It was the Defence Secretary, Brian Marshall, who had spoken this time, an experienced politician, whose advice was usually sound, based on years of experience.

“With respect, Mister Secretary, if we don't put our forces on alert now, by the time you find out their true intentions, it could be too late. Who knows what weapons they possess and from what distance they could fire them? Striking first might be our best and only hope,” countered Carter, almost scowling at Marshall, a man whom he considered weak and ineffectual.

Both men had valid points and both could be right, Roberts knew. The prime minister looked up at the huge screen on the far wall with its map of the world and gestured towards a red blinking light superimposed upon it.

“Is that it?”

“Yes, Prime Minister,” answered Wilson, the civilian technician in charge of the hardware, who had been present during the barbed exchange but who had remained silent.

The prime minister noted the countdown clock in the corner of the screen, which read 38 minutes and a few seconds, but he didn't comment on it.

“What's that yellow blip off the north west coast of Scotland?”

“That's HMS Avenger, sir, a Vanguard Class attack submarine carrying 16 Trident 2 nuclear missiles. It has first strike capability. As soon as those alien craft enter our atmosphere, it has the weapons to reach and neutralise them,” answered Carter, his pride shining through.

The prime minister nodded but was distracted by a junior officer handing a piece of paper to Carter.

“What is it, General?”

The general smiled, obviously feeling somewhat vindicated that others had agreed with his assessment.

“Satellites report that all of the other nuclear powers have gone on full nuclear alert and some of our European allies want to know what action we are proposing, as the alien ships appear to be heading here. Missile silos are opening all over the world, Prime Minister.” Even as he spoke, green dots started flashing on the screen in front of them indicating their locations. “I strongly recommend that we follow suit, sir.”

Roberts suddenly felt the weight of the world on his shoulders as dozens of pairs of eyes stared his way. He looked at the panoramic map as he deliberated, his eyes drawn to the countdown clock which appeared to be taunting him as it raced through the remaining time. A bead of sweat began to meander down his forehead and he wiped it away with the back of his hand. He turned back to the small gathering of people around him, each man's face totally unreadable, although he believed he knew where each one stood on the matter. They could all advise him, but at the end of the day it was his decision. He was Commander-in-Chief and this was his moment.

After what felt like an eternity to those gathered about him, he finally opened his mouth to issue some instructions, but was almost relieved when an aide whispered in his ear that the Russian president was on the telephone. The prime minister picked up the receiver and the Russian president's face immediately replaced the map on the large screen.

“President Sikorsky, are you tracking the alien ships?”

“We are,” was the gruff reply. “What are your intentions, Prime Minister Roberts? My people tell me that we have only minutes left before a first strike capability is no longer an option. The rest of the world is ready to do its duty, so why do you hesitate?” The president's eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Unless of course, the British and American governments know something that the rest of us don't. If this is the case, Russia and the rest of the world will never forgive or forget.” He let the implied threat hang in the air.

“Whilst I appreciate the sentiment, President Sikorsky, I can assure you that the British Government knows no more than you do. Nor I suspect, do the Americans. Besides, I'm sure that your own satellites are showing that the Americans have already gone to Defcon 1 and President Fredericks has already been in contact urging me to do the same as you are suggesting, but I told him what I'm about to say to you.” Sikorsky's expression suggested that he still didn't believe the British prime minister and suspected some sort of collusion. Roberts decided to press on regardless. “I

would respectfully point out that we do not know the visitors' intentions and as such we may be missing out on a unique opportunity by making our first action one of hostile intent. This could be an entirely friendly delegation. I think we should wait."

"The Russian government will not stand by and let..." The Russian president was interrupted for a few seconds as someone off screen spoke to him. "Prime Minister Roberts, I've just been advised that the lead alien craft has destroyed one of our satellites. This is not the action of a peaceful people."

Wilson hurried over to one of the many screens nearby and after a few seconds deliberation and conversing with its operator he said, "I can confirm destruction of the Russian satellite, Prime Minister, two American ones and also one of ours."

Prime Minister Roberts glanced over at Brian Marshall and Jack Warner. Marshall merely shrugged his shoulders at the news of the satellites indicating that their destruction could be for any number of reasons, whilst Warner was talking quietly with the prime minister's chief of security. Prime Minister Roberts turned back to the screen.

"President Sikorsky, I've just been informed that one of ours has also been destroyed as have a couple of American satellites, but I still think we should wait. There might be a reason for their action."

"There is – they're hostile and trying to blind us before they attack. I only contacted you out of courtesy, Prime Minister Roberts, as it is to your country that the alien ships seem to be heading. Russia was willing to follow your lead and support the British Government, but as you do not seem to have the stomach for it Russia will take unilateral action to protect the sovereignty of this planet and history will judge you as weak."

"President Sikorsky I'm begging you...What just happened?" snapped Roberts when the screen reverted to the panorama of the world.

"Sorry, Prime Minister, but the Russian President severed the link," replied Wilson.

Roberts looked up and met the harsh gaze of General Carter. "Seventeen minutes until the craft comes within range, Prime Minister."

Seventeen minutes! The time was rushing by.

"Prime Minister?" It was Jack Warner.

"What is it, Jack?"

“Your wife and daughter are on their way, sir, and should be here within the next 20 minutes.”

“Thank God.” The prime minister scanned the faces of those around him and momentarily closed his eyes, before saying, “Okay, arm the missiles and go to the highest state of readiness, but let's keep all our options open for as long as possible.”

Within two minutes command keys had been brought, unsealed and their codes tapped in and verified by the prime minister, the defence secretary and General Carter.

A few minutes after that Carter announced, with some satisfaction, that the missiles were primed.

Roberts looked at the countdown clock; 11 minutes 43 seconds.

“Prime Minister, there's a message coming in,” announced a technician sitting at a terminal directly in front of Roberts. Wilson hurried over to verify his subordinate's report.

“The Russians again?” asked Roberts, wondering why they weren't using the hotline.

“No, sir: this one appears to be coming from the alien ship,” said Wilson, turning to face the prime minister.

Everybody looked at Wilson.

As he spoke, the screen of every computer terminal was suddenly filled with the image of a green skinned alien, with large black eyes, two holes for a nose and a very small mouth. The alien appeared to have no ears and a ridge of small vertical horns ran from between its eyes and over the back of its head. It regarded the humans without expression and the humans stared back in awe.

“I think you should probably say something, Prime Minister,” urged the defence secretary. When the prime minister didn't answer, he prompted him again. “Prime Minister?”

“What? Yes, of course.” He took a step forward as if that would demonstrate to the alien that he was in charge. “I am Prime Minister Neville Roberts of the United Kingdom, one of hundreds of nations on this planet. If your intentions are peaceful, I welcome you on behalf of all mankind to the planet Earth.” Roberts glanced at Jack Warner and Brian Marshall for support and they both smiled and nodded their approval.

The alien just stared back at him. There was no way of knowing for sure that they could hear him, let alone understand him. Still he had to try.

He was about to add something further, when the alien began speaking, his mouth barely opening. The words made no sense and appeared to be a mix of many Earth languages, slurred or spoken ridiculously slowly. Technicians worked frantically to clear background noise and to translate the message. Then as quick as it had come, it disappeared and the computer screens returned to their previous images. Roberts noticed that the countdown clock was showing 7 minutes and 10 seconds. He was running out of time.

“Can someone tell me what he said?” shouted Roberts to the room in general.

“We're working on it, sir,” Wilson called back from his work station.

“Then work quicker, damn it, I've got to know their intentions.”

“We're almost out of time, Prime Minister,” stated General Carter unnecessarily.

“That could have been a peaceful greeting,” said Defence Secretary Marshall.

“Or they could have just declared war,” countered the general.

Again all eyes turned to Prime Minister Roberts.

“Sir, we're picking up a huge build up of energy on the craft,” announced a technician sitting at one of the desks off to the left of the screen.

“Confirmed,” announced Wilson.

“What is it?” asked Roberts.

“I don't know, sir.”

“I do,” interjected Carter. “It's some kind of damned weapon. We're out of time, sir.”

“With respect, General Carter, that's just conjecture. It could be anything, Prime Minister: it doesn't have to be a weapon,” said Marshall.

“What do you think, Jack?” asked Roberts.

“I don't know, Prime Minister. As Brian said, it could be anything and that includes a weapon. I guess we face a choice - a leap of faith if you like.”

“Prime Minister, we have a little less than 90 seconds until our optimum strike time. You need to decide, sir,” said General Carter assertively.

“Where the hell are the translation people?” shouted Roberts.

“Sorry, sir, we're having a lot of trouble patching it together.”

The prime minister didn't bother looking round to see who had answered; his eyes were irrevocably fixed on the screen in front of him.

"We have multiple launches, sir," announced an airman nearby.

Carter hurried to terminal. "Confirmed. The Russians, Chinese and the Americans have all launched. Over twenty missiles are locked onto the alien ships. Time's up, Prime Minister if we want to be part of this party."

Praying that God would forgive him, Roberts gave the order and within seconds four missiles were launched from the nuclear submarine patrolling off northwest Scotland. Roberts and everyone else watched on the big screen as four red dots traced their way across the screen from the yellow blip towards the alien fleet. A few seconds later more dots appeared on the screen as the French, who had also had reservations, finally launched their own missiles. The bunker fell virtually silent as everyone watched the missiles snake their way towards the alien fleet which had now come to a halt just a few miles above London.

The chief of security touched his earpiece as he received a message and then hurried over to the prime minister.

"Your wife and daughter are just a couple of minutes away, sir."

The prime minister never took his eyes off the screen and merely nodded his acknowledgement to the guard.

Suddenly several beams of light shot out from each of the alien craft immersing the missiles in its blanket, before the beam and the dots representing the missiles, disappeared from the screen.

"What just happened, General?" asked Roberts.

"The aliens used some sort of energy beam to neutralise our missiles, sir. As I feared, their technology would appear to be well in excess of our own." He resisted the desperate urge to add that that was why he had been relentlessly suggesting a pre-emptive early strike.

"We have incoming, sir," announced another airman to the prime minister's right.

Everybody stared in horror at the screen as ten projectiles shot out of the alien ships towards Earth.

"NORAD confirms multiple weapons launched from the craft, type unknown," announced Carter. "Trajectory indicates likely targets to be Moscow, Beijing, Washington, Paris... and London."

Roberts nodded slowly. "Just the countries which attacked them." As he spoke, he became aware of an airforce officer handing the defence

secretary a piece of paper. Brian Marshall looked up and caught the prime minister's eye. The colour had drained from the defence secretary's face, Roberts noticed.

"Prime Minister, the computer has finally translated the message from the aliens," said Marshall.

"What does it say, Brian?" although in his heart he knew already.

The defence secretary looked down at the piece of paper and started to read. "People of Earth, we come to you in peace as refugees seeking asylum and your friendship. Your space satellites were prohibiting our communications systems and had to be destroyed. We mean you no harm but will defend ourselves. Please acknowledge."

Prime Minister Roberts nodded and smiled wryly. He reached inside his pocket and withdrew an old and cherished photo of his wife and daughter. Turning to the big screen he watched as one by one, the capital cities of the countries which had fired upon the aliens winked out of existence on the big screen, until finally the last projectile hurtled towards London. Then it all went dark.

DRAWN CLOSE

Ron Koppelberger

The glass container held a fog of crimson liquid. Edward Lester stared into the murky depths of the container and grinned. The alien was only partially visible in the swirl of colored water. As he looked into the container two things happened, his eyes took on a curious amber hue and the stream of thoughts running through his mind became muddled and distant, more like an invading presences consciousness.

He grinned again and thought about killing everyone in the lab. He saw himself standing over the bodies of the other lab assistants and he was thin, gray like the alien, dripping the crimson blood of a captive. The idea had just come to him from nowhere. "I'll kill them all!" he said aloud to himself. The misty waters in the tank swirled and swam before him and he heard a whisper, "Kill them and release me!" He stood back for a moment and looked at the container again. The eyes, the damn eyes, he thought. They had turned scarlet from the gentle amber hue they had been. Edward rubbed his temples and turned away. He had to get away from the invader's thoughts. Later he would drain the tank and effectively kill the alien. No one in the lab knew about the alien's thoughts, he hoped they would be prepared for them if they came back to earth. He could only hope and pray.

CAPTAIN O

David Perlmutter

The demise of the planet Oviduct, on July 28, 2250, was something many had anticipated or desired, but nobody in the galaxy had actually imagined it occurring in their lifetime.

For at least two centuries the planet, whose female residents resembled the greyhounds of Earth with pure white fur, had policed the galaxy through the efforts of their elite police force, the O Corps. These were the mightiest and most intelligent of the planet's residents, who gained their positions only after a well-structured period of physical and mental training. At the request of others (and sometimes without this), they engaged (or interfered, some would say) in a wide range of interplanetary politics. With superhuman strength, speed, intelligence and cunning, they defeated space pirates, suppressed slave rebellions and engaged in warfare with rebellious and evil-minded alien races, specifically their male equivalents the Spermataphobes of Spermatophobia. Despite a taboo against relationships between the two races, some relations did occur. The products of these were ostracized, since their powers outclassed those of both races and, therefore, posed a threat to them both.

At the head of the O Corps was the mightiest, fastest and most intelligent of the O Corps (at least in her own mind), Captain O. This creature was not only a strategic and sympathetic military leader, but also a powerful and effective superhero. Clad in her red jumpsuit with "O" emblazoned on the chest in white, she was known to take on entire battalions of the enemy and defeat them all without breaking a sweat. She made numerous friends and allies through her adventures and battles and nearly as many enemies. Therefore, when the planet exploded, there was a considerable amount of finger-pointing and buck-passing among the nearest neighbor nations, none of which wished to take the blame for such a drastic and uncalled-for act of genocide.

Yet hope continued to exist among the faithful that the O Corps - and Captain O herself - would re-emerge. They frequently invoked the fact that, if they were ever killed, they could be resurrected through the process of astral projection, the takeover by force of another's mind. Especially on Earth, they said, there would be plenty of dogs in which they could will

themselves to be resurrected. Finding exactly the right dogs, however, was another matter...

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On Earth, as in outer space, canines were the dominant race on Earth at the time of Oviduct's implosion. From the time of the great nuclear war that destroyed the human race in 2100, the genetic remnants of it - and thus the culture and intelligence of it-survived within hybrids created from nuclear fusion with other animals. Of these, the canine race gradually became the dominant and eventually, essentially, the only one, by 2150. In the following years, new national governments, united under a central global framework, emerged and life from the twentieth century gradually re-emerged, with all the advantages and pitfalls that would ensue.

As a consequence, much of the social concerns of the earlier century, particularly concerning race and religion, came to reassert themselves. It became common once again for citizens to be persecuted for having certain color shades in their fur, following certain religious practices and having abnormalities in their genetic makeup. Again, there were also class and wage disparities, another set of differences human beings had wrongly thought they had eliminated in the twenty-first century, so that political and social unrest also resumed, unfettered.

The worst of this, of course, was the re-emergence of subterranean forces of evil which had been driven away, first by the long ago Enlightenment of the human eighteenth century and then suppressed in the caustic Fantasy/Reality Wars of the 2050s and 2060s, in which dogs first achieved the "humanity" that would mark their dominance on Earth and space in the future. To combat this rising tide of injustice, the global political council authorized the creation of a new security force, the Dogs Overseeing Protection against all Evil, or D.O.P.E. These elite figures soon cut dashing images across Earth and space as they sought to act for and defend the freedom of the good. It soon became the ideal for all good-thinking pups to aspire to wear the custom-tailored suits sported by the agents of D.O.P.E. Two of these form the basis of this tale.

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Olivia Mongrel was born three years before the demise of Oviduct, the only child from the union of Melvin and Anne Mongrel. Her family line on both sides was descended from the few dogs whose genes had fused with the human followers of Abraham and Sarah and she was to have considerable pride in this inheritance in her later years. Melvin, who made his living as a professional *tummler*^[1], had a very acute sense of humor, while Anne, a retired actress and spy, had the necessary flair for the dramatic and the clear-headed resourcefulness needed for both positions. Those who knew all of them testified to the fact that she had inherited the best qualities of both her parents, qualities that, no doubt, would suit her for whatever career she wanted to pursue.

That career, it turned out, was in the halls of D.O.P.E. To this end, she was accompanied by her contemporary and closest friend, Bobby Mutt, whom she took a caring and protective interest in despite the fact that he was a *goy*^[2]. Bobby, like Olivia, was an only pup and his mother had constantly been overprotective of him until he finally sought to break these ties. With Olivia's help, he convinced her that, in the terms of her faith, he was a *macher*^[3] and able to act by himself. She conceded to this reluctantly, for, in spite of the persuasiveness of Olivia, she wasn't entirely willing to let Bobby go.

Olivia and Bobby were constantly together - playing basketball, reading and exploring the countryside around the apartment complex where they lived. So naturally, when their education was completed as the law mandated, they sought out and gained admissions to try out for positions at D.O.P.E. The three month period they had to wait was tough, especially on Bobby's constantly jangled nerves, but soon their credentials passed and they were allowed to come for interviews at the D.O.P.E. offices, located in the basement of a tailor shop in downtown New York.

The interview with Olivia went well, for the most part, except for one sequence of questions with her examiner where the issue of "race" emerged.

"So, Miss Mongrel," the examiner said, "I notice you have a certain inflection..."

Olivia, clad in the white shorts and Star of David emblazoned shirt that comprised her usual casual wardrobe, twisted defensively in her chair.

"So?" she asked defensively.

"Well," said the examiner. "I was wondering if you were... Jewish?"

“With this shirt...” she responded, with a touch of obvious emphasis, “...you think I’m a METHODIST?”

It was then that a chill of fear struck her. Was she to be denied her dream job simply because of her religious background? She became serious.

“Why?” she asked. “Is there a problem with that?”

“No,” said the examiner. “We’re equal opportunity, of course. It’s just that you might... stand out... in certain company. We’ve never had an openly Jewish agent before and there might be some who wouldn’t like that.”

“Let them suffer!” the young puppy shot back. “I’m proud of who I am and nobody’s going to make me change. Now, as to changing my voice and appearance on my own terms, that’s something else!”

“Uh, OK,” the examiner replied.

Despite this awkwardness, Olivia passed, as did Bobby, and given the closeness already evident between them, they became partners. As the “new people”, they tended to get the espionage equivalent of clerical duty, which typically amounted to chasing down tin-pot revolutionary armies in the tropics and battling domestic mad scientists at home. It was fairly routine work, enlivened only by Olivia’s occasional dropping of the “gentile” cover that was unofficially being forced upon her by the higher-ups. The apotheosis of this was pointing her gun at a suspect and saying “All right, *schmegegah*[4], drop the *yeagah*[5]!”. The suspect was so baffled that the pair easily subdued him, although Bobby wisely suggested to Olivia that she might want to tone down the Yiddish in the future.

By the middle of her first year as a D.O.P.E. agent, Olivia had shown sufficient prowess that she received a summons to come-alone-to a secret conference with Intrepid, the mysterious former soldier and intelligence master who had commanded D.O.P.E. since its inception. Immediately a feeling of inadequacy came over her; a *tummler*’s girl like her wasn’t fit to scrape the gum off his boots, let alone stand in the same room with him. He had fought for the dominance of the canine race single-handedly from his early days and had built D.O.P.E. up from scratch without a direct mandate from the government entirely on his own terms, as she well knew. He could

make or break her career, and like it or not, she *had* to accede to whatever he wanted. And apparently he *did* have plans for her; but what?

When she opened the door, she was greeted by a brown dog with a streak of grey along his back and the top of his head, clad in a powder blue suit and tie - Intrepid himself. From behind his desk, this grizzled veteran seemed to speak with the voice of God, or at least he did to younger dogs like Olivia.

“Hello, Olivia!” he intoned deeply as she walked through the door. Scared of his voice, she immediately jumped back.

“Don’t startle me like that!” she responded “You nearly made me *plotz*^[6]!”

“Sorry,” he replied modestly.

He motioned for her come forward and she obediently did so.

“Olivia,” he continued. “The reason I called you up here is that I need you to undertake some special duties for us...”

She could almost sense a sexist undertone to that statement and, like a good feminist, she pounced on it.

“What the hell do you mean, ‘special duties’?” she snapped. “Do I look like an effin’ secretary?”

His confidence was undimmed, as she had barely penetrated his surface. He wasn’t in charge for nothing.

“Not at all,” he replied. “That wasn’t what I meant. And,” he added, shifting to a “boss” tone, “you had better watch your tongue when you speak to me!”

Olivia was nervous again. Was this it for her? She had to say *something*!

“Sorry, Mr. Intrepid... boss... sir,” she stammered. “I’m fired, right?”

He laughed reassuringly.

“Don’t be silly!” he said. “This particular duty is something only you can fulfill for us. Come with me.”

He got up from the desk and walked with slow, deliberate authoritative pacing. She followed, quickly but as meekly as she could.

He outlined to her the rudiments of the plan. Recently, he said, the D.O.P.E. scientists had discovered fragments of the planet Oviduct, which had buried themselves within the earth’s outer layer, undoubtedly having drifted towards Earth after the planet exploded. Further research confirmed this and also revealed the fact that the fragments contained the projected

astral body of the heroic and all-powerful Captain O. The body was removed from the remains and distilled into a serum, to be consumed by that entity fit to house her body. Rejected efforts on older female agents confirmed that only a young and not entirely mature female was to be the most ideal host. And Olivia, having only recently joined, was seen to be, as the youngest female agent on staff, to be the ideally desired choice.

“So you want me to take the serum, right?” Olivia asked.

“Exactly,” said Intrepid.

“Does it have side effects?” she continued.

“We won’t know until we try it out,” said Intrepid. “But,” he added, with increased seriousness, “you cannot tell anyone you have been exposed to this!”

“Not even Bobby?” she asked.

“No,” he said.

Olivia stopped, crossed her forepaws and got as serious as it was possible for her to be.

“So basically I’m to be a guinea pig for an experimental drug that could kill me and I can’t tell anyone about it.”

“Right,” said Intrepid.

“I don’t have a choice, do I?”

“No.”

With no options in sight, Olivia rolled up her sleeve and prepared to take the injection she thought was coming.

“All right,” she said. “Let’s get to it!”

“It’s not that simple,” he replied. “Come on.”

And so, again, he led and she followed.

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It was *not* that simple, indeed. All Olivia could do, as she sat strapped to that gurney in the D.O.P.E. laboratory, was wonder what she had gotten herself into.

She gazed over to her right as Dr. Funkenstein, the eccentric head of the lab, was preparing to begin the process of injecting the serum into Olivia’s body, under the tight supervision of Intrepid. Funkenstein, like Olivia, was the product of the dispersal of canine genes with those of a minority human race, in this case the frequently beleaguered, dark-skinned

group that was known officially as “African-Americans” but unofficially by sundry harsher names. His devotion to his “heritage” extended to embracing the tribal lunacy established by the purveyors of the “funk” music of the 1970s, whose views and ideas he propagated in tandem with his equally extensive knowledge of genetics and biology. However, if you were to hear him and judge him by his appearance, which resembled a combination of a circus clown and a 1950s film alien, you might conclude that this was otherwise.

When he finished adjusting the battery of circuits beside his nervous victim, Funkenstein turned his attention to Olivia.

“Now, baby,” he reassured her “you just relax. My machine’s gonna soup you up so you can have *big time* power in your little body!”

“Is this going to involve a needle?” Olivia asked. “I don’t like that.”

“No, baby,” Funkenstein reassured her again. “But there’s gonna be plenty of ‘LECTRICITY flowing through you!”

Olivia sat bolt upright. She was *not* going to be part of *this*.

“Oh no, you don’t!” she snapped at Intrepid. “You didn’t say anything about me being barbecued by Willie Dynamite here. I want out!”

Intrepid calmly returned to her previous prone position on the operating table.

“We have an agreement, Olivia.” he said. “You don’t want to be a bad dog who doesn’t live up to her promises, do you?”

“No” said Olivia, with determination. “But I don’t wanna *die*, either.”

“You won’t die,” Intrepid told her. “The electrical current has been wired to act only upon transferring the serum into your bloodstream. This is the only way it will work. And,” he continued as the “boss”, “I need not remind you of the consequences of backing out!”

Olivia was desperate to avoid the electrical treatment and continued to ask him: “You’re sure I couldn’t just get a shot of the stuff in my...”

Before anything else could be said, Funkenstein pulled the switch and the process was underway. Olivia bellowed in pain as the cosmic changes ensued. As she would later recall, it was quite odd that an “ugly little runt” like her would get the “ultimate makeover treatment”. But this was exactly what was occurring. In place of Olivia, in less than a minute, stood the tall, mighty and all-powerful Captain O, fully resurrected in her trademark costume.

The creature was quick to burst her bonds and stand in front of Intrepid, entirely suspicious of her new surroundings. Her killer instincts were fully intact, but he was unmoved, as usual.

"Where am I?" she commanded, as was her usual wont. "Name my precise location - and what you creatures want with me!"

"This is Earth, Captain," said Intrepid. "I am Intrepid and you are in the headquarters of D.O.P.E., the enforcers of justice in this galaxy."

The Captain was astonished. When she had heroically volunteered to submit her body and mind for astral projection in the dying days of Oviduct, it had seemed a distant dream that she would be resurrected, at any time or any place. Yet here she was, born again on Earth. It boggled her mind, but only briefly, for her mental powers were as formidable as her physical ones.

"What precisely do you have in mind for me, now that I am a prisoner in your clutches?" the Captain snapped. "For if your intentions are not honorable, sir, I warn you that you will face the full force of my wrath!"

Intrepid was not moved, however. He was fully aware of who he was dealing with. She may have been a powerful military leader on Oviduct, but on Earth, in *his* organization, she was going to have to toe the line. And he intended to let her know this.

"We resurrected you, Captain," he replied calmly, "with the intention of having you as a liaison agent for dealing with our most threatening menaces. But understand this. I will not allow you to believe that you are greater than this organization. Perhaps among the Oviductians you were allowed to develop an ego to match your physical and mental prowess, but you will not be permitted such behavior among us on Earth. If you choose to act this way, we will destroy you as easily as we remade you!"

Furious, Captain O threw what used to be called a "temper tantrum" among human beings.

"You command me? I who commanded a NATION?" she bellowed. "I serve nobody, especially such odious beings as yourselves! I half expected that you would want me to serve your aims and this has only been *confirmed* now! You, sir, have offended the wrong warrior!"

She lunged at him with primordial ferocity. He fired his gun at her, but it was useless since her hide, fur and costume were bulletproof. But he had already expected this. As athletic and mentally skilled as he was, he knew he was no match for her and, as he planned, she soon had him cornered. With another lunge, she pinned him against a wall and pounded a

powerful paw into his face, then did it again two more times. Yet he was unfazed. For he had, in his possession, the only means known to bring her to her knees. Knowing full well she would try to attack him, he had enclosed in his pocket a thermos full of coffee - the deadly weakness of all Oviductians. As he was being further assaulted by her, he removed the thermos, poured a cup into the lid and threw it into her face. With a staggering scream, she fell to the ground. He retained his impassive façade, though it now contained a slight smirk of bemusement.

As Captain O's powers faded and she began to sink into a putrid puddle of ooze, she appealed to Intrepid.

"The antidote!" she cried. "I must have it! I will be incapacitated without it!"

"Not until you agree to our terms," he snapped. "With this, we can control you, more than anyone you have ever faced can. Any more impudence on your part and we will make this *permanent*. So understand this: accede to our conditions - or else!"

"Yes," she responded, with unusually meek humility. "But I must..."

"Not this time," he responded. "It's your own fault for attacking me. But you will be reactivated when you are needed - and *only* then!"

"I will make you regret this!" Captain O shouted, just before her body completely dissolved away, leaving only the prostrate form of her host, Olivia.

"Wha' happened?" was all she could reply.

"Captain O has been resurrected," Intrepid said, "inside your body. It is therefore your duty to serve as her reincarnation when she is needed - and, perhaps, to show her the *humility* she will need if she wishes to continue operating as part of D.O.P.E."

"If Captain O is so powerful," Olivia asked, "how is it possible that we can control her?"

"Her weakness," he said. "Coffee."

Olivia laughed loudly. "Coffee?" she said "What kind of a joke is this?"

Intrepid was still serious, so she immediately shut up.

"It's no joke," he said. "If any hot, brewed coffee touches any part of her body, she will become disabled and you will not be able to resurrect her for twelve hours. In the interval, she will be helpless and you will be forced to rely on your own resources."

“Okay,” said Olivia. “But supposing she doesn’t want to keep helping us?”

Intrepid seized her paw with ferocity unknown to her before.

“Don’t get cocky, girl!” he shouted. “You and Captain O work for ME - and you will do as I say! Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” she replied meekly. She was not interested in further enflaming his anger. She could already see he’d been through too much.

“All right,” he continued, dropping her paw. “Got the pills, Funkenstein?”

“Yeah, man!” said the Doctor. Having been incapacitated by the resurrection of Captain O, he had been magically resurrected by the sound of his name.

“Pills?” Olivia asked.

“This is the most important part, baby!” the Doctor explained. “You take these pills to turn yourself into Captain O and back again. They *funk* around with your bloodstream and make you *groove* to the beat of your superpowers. Dig?”

“Got it, Pops!” Olivia replied, in the closest approximation she could make of his “funk” jargon.

“Now remember this,” Intrepid warned her for the last time. “Captain O’s resurrection is to be kept a secret between the three of us. You will not let anyone else know of this.”

A frightening fear struck her mind.

“But what about Bobby?” she asked. “We don’t have secrets. I can’t lie to him.”

“That’s your problem, not mine,” he said, dismissively. “You are relieved.”

“But...”

“Go!”

“Yes, sir.”

She left the room, burdened with the greatest assignment of her life: keeping a secret from her best friend.

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It was easy at first. She was able to explain to him that she had found out that she was allergic to coffee - believable, since he’d never seen her drink

it. As for the pills, when he saw them, she maintained that they were for her tapeworm. Though he'd never heard her mention this ailment, he trusted her enough to accept this without question.

But a more serious test for her façade was yet to come. New York was quickly beset by a new wave of crime from a gang of hoods known as the Five Points, after the notorious neighborhood from which they based their operations. These felons, unusual for the time, were genetic fusions with the spirits of the bloodthirsty human criminals who had inhabited the area in the human 19th century. They were, therefore, highly versed not only in gunplay but in fistfights and the use of all manners of swords. It was a measure of D.O.P.E.'s confidence in Olivia and Bobby that they were assigned to eliminate the threat posed by these ruffians.

It was for this reason that Olivia and Bobby found themselves walking in the Five Points district on a cold, dark night.

"Olly," Bobby asked his partner. "Are you scared?"

"Course not, Bob!" she replied. "You know me, enough fight for the both of us!"

"I *would* like to be able to fight for myself, for once," he answered.

"Is it *my* fault you panic so much?" she asked.

"No," he said. "It's my fault. But how can I overcome the panic if I don't act for myself?"

The conversation was abruptly halted as a rough group of thugs surrounded them. Dressed in identical leather jackets with "FIVE POINTS" stitched on the back in white, they carried a variety of weapons, from ancient derringer pistols to the baseball bat wielded by the leader, who immediately approached Bobby.

"What d'ye want?" he asked, in a very old "New York" accent.

"You fellows have been roughing up town quite a bit," said Bobby, with heavily restrained fear, "and me and my partner intend to take you down!"

"What d'ye mean, pard'ner?" the leader replied. The others laughed.

Bobby turned to his side. Olivia was not there.

"Olly!" he shouted.

"Tough luck!" said the leader. "Y'll really be needin' her when we finish with yer..."

They closed in on him. But suddenly a street light, previously deactivated by a thrown rock, was reactivated and the mighty Captain O

was soon visible to all in the night sky.

"I beg to differ!" she growled, hanging on to the street light with an Olympian grip.

"Lissen here, g'hal," said the Five Points leader. "Who are ye?"

"I am CAPTAIN O!" she shouted in a commanding voice. "And I make it my job to expose and destroy all purveyors of malfeasance, criminality and indecency, yourselves included!"

"I don't know who ye are," the leader growled, "but you'll be a pretty beaten g'hal if you tries to mess with the b'hoys of the Five Points!"

"On the contrary, sir," said the Captain. "It is *you* who will be beaten!" And, with gymnastic agility, she jumped to the ground and confronted the latest in a long series of foes.

They surrounded her on all sides with all of their weapons and muscles, but she had faced far more with far greater force than this and they held no fear for her. Guns were fired and she bent them. Knives bounced off her back, bent and useless. Chains wrapped themselves around her limbs and stiffened sinews broke them. Even the leader's baseball bat was useless against the Rock of Gibraltar that housed her formidable mind. With no recourse left, they jumped upon her as a mass, but she fought and defeated them as one. In less than ten minutes, to a man, they were scattered and humiliated, their jackets torn, their arms bent out of joint, their legs kicked and distorted, their faces a mass of pulp, beaten to a degree unseen by anyone before. She had thoroughly humiliated them but, for her, it was simply another day at the office.

Finally she grabbed the leader and gazed into his eyes with vicious intent.

"Understand, *sir*," she intoned, "that this is only a *fraction* of what I am capable of! You do not wish to anger me further unless you wish to terminate your life. Now, kindly inform all in your immediate vicinity that CAPTAIN O is on your planet - and she intends to firmly remove intractable criminals like you from THE FACE OF THE EARTH!"

With casual ease, she tossed him away as she would a baseball. The others promptly retreated as well.

Satisfied, the Captain gave a self-satisfied sigh and relaxed. This was not long lasting, however.

Bobby, who had witnessed the entire affair, was suspicious of her and had placed his "cop" demeanor on to interrogate this mysterious newcomer.

“Hold it,” he said, placing a firm paw on her shoulder.

The Captain was not easily intimidated, but she had been taken off-guard and was at a loss to tell him who she was. Abruptly, she thought of what to do, for to worry about things was not something she was accustomed to doing. Soon after, she whirled around, smiling and mechanically offering a paw for a handshake.

“Hello!” she said, with a layered tone of familiarity. “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“We haven’t,” he said, still suspicious. “Listen, ‘Captain O’, if that *is* your name; I want to ask you a few questions. Starting with: What have you done with my pal Olivia?”

She panicked for a moment, but only a moment. For she had an answer.

“Miss Mongrel was abruptly overcome with an attack of cowardice and I had to remove her from the scene at once. She is safe now.”

“Are you sure?” Bobby was no fool, despite his neuroses and he could sense when he was being “played”. “That’s not like her. Besides, she’d never let a *complete stranger* pinch hit for her like that. She would have told me herself, however unlikely that might seem.”

“I made her acquaintance some time ago,” the Captain replied. “She has become so attached to me that she trusts me with her life.”

“Well, okay then,” he said. “Not my business to interfere with that stuff. But you gotta answer me this,” here he changed emphasis, “Who are you? And why have you suddenly shown up here, *for no apparent reason?*”

The Captain was now in a greater bind than before, even worse than when the Spider Dogs of La Bamba had bound her limbs and torso in a cocoon and she only defeated them with her mind and teeth. She knew she would be permanently immobilized if she betrayed Intrepid, but her Oviductian code of ethics required her to give knowledge to any questioner who asked information of her. What was she to do?

Problems like that were as easily solvable for her as it was for her to defeat a posse of foes physically, however. She had already taken a liking to this inquisitive young boy and, though she had no experience with the opposite sex except in battle, she was quite willing and able to get to know him better. So she would give what he wanted, but she would spread it out over time, as she and only she desired. He would know something about

her, of course, but not everything. He'd have to figure out the rest for himself.

She took his paw and hustled him into a corner. It took less than a second because of her speed. Bobby also felt the awesome power of her strength, a power he had never felt in any dog, boy or girl, before. He knew she was not to be messed with.

"I feel I can trust you, my friend," she said to him, "so I will give you the information you require. I am originally a native of the planet Oviduct, what you Earthlings capriciously refer to as an "alien". I was a military officer of the first rank there, hence my name and the honor to wear this "O" on the chest on my uniform. My planet exploded six months ago, according to your planet's time and I am the last survivor of my race. We were committed to bringing of peace to the galaxy, along with the destruction of evil within it and I have resolved to continue doing the same on Earth. But if those inferior beings I fought represent your highest class of criminals on this planet, my job appears to be fairly easy!"

"It's not always like that," said Bobby "Listen, Captain..."

"Yes?" she asked, with a flirtatious edge.

"Listen, Captain, me and my pal Olivia work for D.O.P.E..."

An angry sneer formed on the Captain's lips.

"Do *not* bring that group up again in my presence!" she snapped. "Those arrogant fools thought themselves fit to enslave me to their biased notions of righteous justice! I have escaped their clutches and I intend to have nothing to do with them in the future, except yourself and Miss Mongrel, of course. But place me in the same room as your "revered" employer and I will not be responsible for the consequences!"

"You can be safe about that with me," Bobby replied, with some resentment. "I barely know him, myself."

"Very well, friend," she said. "You and I must therefore keep my origins a secret between us. If my true history were to become known, it could have drastic consequences for me - and you."

"You can count on that," he replied.

He, too, was gaining affection for her, but as he did not know her well enough and she knew not even his name, he gentlemanly and she lady-like refused to act upon it. They simply stood there for a moment, his paw cushioned between her mighty mitts, before she released her grip on him and prepared to depart.

“Will I ever see you again?” he asked.

“Undoubtedly, if you are such a magnet for evil as you appear to be!” she replied, with cunning and sympathetic wit.

They both laughed and she placed an affectionate peck on his cheek that made him giggle with a schoolboy effervescence heretofore unknown to him.

“Thank you for saving me,” he said.

“It was my pleasure.” she replied. “Not only that, it was my duty. And if my duty and yourself intersect again, we will surely become reacquainted. Goodbye for now, Earth Boy!”

And, with a flying leap and the prevailing breeze, she was off - and he was smitten.

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He was still smitten a moment later, when Olivia re-emerged.

“Hey, Bobby!” she shouted.

He, immediately startled, turned around trying to figure out who was calling him now.

“What the.... aw, Olly!” he ejaculated.

“Gotcha,” she giggled.

“I’ll get you for that, Olly!” he said, catching up and walking off with her.

“Banana Oil, Bob!” she said confidently. “You couldn’t catch me if you tried!”

“I’ll keep trying,” he replied. “Speaking of Banana Oil, did you see that ‘Captain O’ lady around here?”

“Yeah,” she said. “We’ve had a bit of a connection for a little while now. Kind of a girl thing, you understand.”

“I do,” he replied. “She told me who she was everything. Just after you left me holding the bag!”

“I did *not!*” she said defensively “I was right there, backing her up. You just didn’t see me ‘cause I had one of the bad guys’ jackets on after she wiped them up. Then, when she drove them away, I went and laid the smackdown on them some more. You were just so busy watching Captain O that you didn’t notice me.”

“Okay,” he said. “But I think she’s hiding something. And I’m gonna find out what!”

Olivia panicked. Quickly, she tried to dissuade him.

“I’m sure it’s nothing big, Bobby,” she said nonchalantly “Besides, when we’re dealing with crime, we need all the help we can get. And we don’t want to lose her help, do we?”

“You’re right, Olly,” he replied “I’m sure we haven’t seen the last of her.”

For once, he was entirely prophetic.

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[1]An entertainer encouraging guest or audience participation in their activities.

[2]A Gentile or non-Jewish person.

[3]A socially ambitious person: a “man”.

[4]Idiot; fool.

[5]Gun.

[6]Explode; blow up.

## **UNDER THE MOONS OF ORANGE COUNTY**

***Ken L. Jones***

***(For Edgar Rice Burroughs who created a whole lot more good stuff than just his beloved Lord of the Jungle)***

It was supposed to be a wonderful vacation weekend in Anza, California at the desert cabin of his then father's boss, Arno Evanier, for Carl Frost, Jr. and his family. The passengers in the family Woodie station wagon that they were driving were, besides the Frost family proper, one George Mattwig who worked for North American Rockwell as an engineer. George, as always, was regaling the Frost family with all kinds of farfetched sounding notions that only he and a few people were supposedly privy to because they worked for the government. George was fond of telling them that their government had long been involved in time travel research and that lots of people had lost their lives in attempting to perfect it. George would also often talk about all kinds of super scientific things that the government had but wouldn't admit to. Cures for cancer, laser death rays, the ability to clone humans. Most of all, he assured them that there was indeed life in outer space. He also insisted that the Roswell incident was even more complicated and more for real than even the truest believers in it would understand. In fact George would often say cryptically "not only do aliens walk amongst us but they are us."

Now Carl, as you can imagine, absorbed all of this like a sponge but Carl Sr. just couldn't deal with any of this on any level. That was probably why he and Mattwig parted company eventually even though they had been friends and teammates in high school and had gone into the military together. On the night in question George was once again spinning his amazing stories for the Frost family as they sped down a long stretch of deserted highway in the desert towards their goal when a strange occurrence happened. First a brilliant "comet" was seen in the sky above them. It was immediately followed by several dozen more such apparitions.

Carl just about wet his pants with fright when this happened and his father tried to calm him by telling him, "It's just a meteor shower. It happens out here all the time; they just seem bigger because there is nothing much out here."

"Aw quit b.s.-ing the kid, Sarge, you know damn well this is no meteor shower," George said excitedly.

Then, without transition or any kind of warning, the ribbon of highway about two miles ahead lit up with a strange white glow that pulsated and throbbed as it hurried towards them at supersonic speed. This really caused panic to ripple through the car, except for George, because Carl's dad was doing about seventy-five miles an hour at the time and would have no way to not impact with whatever lay ahead of them. As Carl Sr. began to try in vain to brake, Carl was amazed to find that everyone in the car including him had now somehow become very sleepy, as if someone was sedating them. As Carl lost consciousness he swore that he saw God-like beings standing on the highway who reminded him of the way that Jack Kirby drew Thor The God of Thunder in the Journey Into Mystery comic books.

As they drifted off into a deep slumber a strange light enveloped them and George murmured, "Don't worry, your government knows what it's doing."

Approximately five hours later they woke, still inside the car but about fifteen miles further up the road. All of them were exhausted and stiff and sore as if they had spent a long day at the beach and all of them were starving. The Frost family was perplexed and terrified at this turn of events but George took it more than in his stride. In fact, he acted like someone who had just taken LSD for the first time, had a very good trip and had even seen the face of God. He kept murmuring over and over again, "Beautiful, just beautiful."

When Carl had gathered his wits he questioned his father about what had just happened and his father replied, "Nothing happened. We were all exhausted and I fell asleep at the wheel. We just went off the road for awhile. It used to happen all the time when I drove for Jimmy Hoffa and the Teamsters after the war."

George, of course, had wanted to start talking his whole mad rap about the high strangeness that had just went down but when he began to do that Carl Sr. had looked at him with such violence that he hung his head in silence until they reached Arno's cabin. That weekend hadn't turned out to be the fun that they had anticipated. In fact, Arno was completely enraged at their unexplained tardiness. Carl Sr. had snapped off at his boss in response with such vehemence that he had to go in and resign the following Monday.

After that his father had went off and started his own mom and pop refrigeration business that he ran from that day till his death.

What had happened in the desert was a forbidden topic in the Frost family from then on but that didn't stop Carl from trying to remember it, especially the five unaccounted for hours that they had "slept".

What happened many years after this all started out with a trip to the moon. Carl Frost was about twelve years old and lived near Disneyland which he loved. He also loved comic books and dinosaurs, ghosts and time travel and the hot-rodding monsters of Ed "Big Daddy" Roth. He loved outer space too, so that's how he wound up on a crisp September night bouncing on a crater on the moon which just happened to be next to Chris N Pitts barbecue in Garden Grove, California. That night would stay with him forever. It was the defining moment of his life that he would return to over and over again in later years because on that night he discovered infinity. Now some people spend their whole life trying to achieve it through devout meditation or tripping out with mind altering drugs but for Frost it happened as he bounced on a trampoline that was built into a papier-mâché moon crater while he listened to a recording of Elvis crooning It's Now Or Never.

The Moon Park was a fabulous place indeed. It was studded with dug out circular pits that had trampolines strung across the top of them and then draped around that were jagged papier-mâché concoctions painted to resemble moon craters. All around the rest of the park miniature golf style were fanciful aliens and outer space creatures of all types, most of whom were cleverly reworked lawn gnomes and plastic flamingos and other such outdoor bric-a-brac. There was a refreshment stand that sold snow cones, candy bars, soft drinks and a green cheese that was supposed to be what the moon was popularly held to be made out of but which was in reality a very tasty brand of mint flavored gum. On the side of the Chris N Pitts barbecue building that buttressed the park was a large intricate mural that, besides the logo announcing the Moon Park's presence, contained a huge lunar tableaux complete with buxom scantily clad women who were obviously based on Jayne Mansfield, Bettie Page and Irish McCalla. They were supposed to be moon maidens striking defiant sexual poses while cute bug-eyed aliens cavorted around them. A cloud enshrouded earth was also there and hung in the distant sky where one would traditionally expect the moon to be. Twinkling Christmas lights and a loud speaker blasting out L.A.'s top radio station KRLA's ironclad hits list completed the ambiance.

Actually none of this should have happened and probably wouldn't have if Carl had been where he was really supposed to be. But he wasn't which was strange in itself because he usually did exactly what he was told. Back then a promise to his parents was like a promise to God. Where he was really supposed to be was just a few hundred feet away in the nearby Grove Theater, viewing an evening showing of the double-billed Ray Harryhausen's *Jason And The Argonauts* along with Steve McQueen's *The Blob*. Now usually The Grove provided all the pumping up that Carl needed. The prospect of going there with his pals Biggie Biggerstaff and Dave Neet was extremely appealing too. He would have gone if something pulsating in the dark hadn't caught his eye instead. Several silhouettes, soft and alluring, going into it had stirred true sexual desire in him for the first time in his young life. They were five cheerleaders plain and simple and straight out of central casting. They had ponytails, red lipstick, knockout solid bodies with large breasts and perfect rear ends which their matching cheerleader outfits showcased to perfection. They knew how to work what the good Lord had provided them with and they were old enough for at least one of them to have the learner's permit that had got them here. Frost and his pals had arrived at about the same time as the cheerleaders. They had been dropped off by Bob Neet who had ferried them there in the trailer-less cab of the eighteen-wheeler he drove long haul for the Chunky Chocolate Company.

Frost had immediately noticed both the cheerleaders and the Moon Park and had tried to get his companions to jettison the picture show and follow the young ladies into that rather interesting new place. It had sprung up in the month since he had previously been to The Grove with his parents to see the rerelease of Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*. His friends' hormones weren't popping like popcorn yet like Carl's were, probably because their fathers weren't as careless as Frost's dad was with his stash of men's magazines and nudist publications. Carl had learned a lot in the last few months while his parents went square dancing on Thursday nights and he was left alone to do his homework with that august pile of magazines. He had garnered a lot more about life from them than just Hef's Playboy philosophy or all that other folderol that the nudist mags offered about how healthy shuffleboard was au natural. Because of that Frost was primed for what the cheerleaders were so boldly advertising. He followed it into the park even when his more cautious friends declined and went on into

the theater. Frost had to admit that he, under other circumstances, would have enjoyed attending it too.

So it was that of such things destiny are made and Carl wasn't a bit surprised when the peg-legged unshaven ticket taker at the Moon Park allowed the petite young cheerleaders in for free but charged him a quarter for admission. For a while Carl tried to be cool and not act like some goofy kid by freaking out too much about how boss the park itself was to him because he very much wanted to impress the young ladies. They happened to be several grades ahead of him and he needed to show them his maturity and savior faire. For the first hour Carl was in a state of sexual ecstasy as both he and the dirty old one legged reprobate ticket taker watched the girls work their perfect young bodies teasingly on the trampolines to the persistent encouragement of the boss jock patter and endless repetition of KRLA's top forty play list. Carl struggled not to look too dumb and too turned on as he beheld a panorama of flashing panties, short flying pleated skirts, white rolled down socks and even whiter Ipana smiles. All of this mixed with the moonlight, the rock songs, the cool of the night air and the throbbing of the twinkling Christmas lights and reminded him of the time he had several teeth extracted and had been given a large dose of sodium pentothal which had caused him to have ecstatic visions that were like some Arabian night's hookah dream of paradise.

Eventually it became clear to Carl that the girls were strictly teases and weren't any more interested in him than they were in the disgusting old WWII vet who had let them in gratis. Still, Carl didn't regret all this and he never would, for in the short span of time that they had all spent together these girls had given him something beyond mere sexual favors. So it was with a wistful sigh that he watched the girls scamper off, leaving him alone in the park for the next three hours. As they did so he swore that they seemed to evaporate and their car with them as they entered it. But he was beyond caring about such things because he knew that he was now somehow different. While he still loved all the same outré things that he had loved before, he now knew that there was something just as mysterious and way out there that women had to offer that was just as far out, worthwhile and worth seeking as anything he had ever found in a comic book or in an episode of the *One Step Beyond* TV show.

Carl was contemplating all of this in a most hopped up but strangely satisfied state of mind as he bounced up and down on the trampoline

listening to Elvis, Chubby Checker and their brethren. He really dug the ambiance of the good old Moon Park and as he bounced, he entered a Zen like state, imaging himself as an adult living on the real moon, traveling around in a real rocket ship to the stars and perhaps even voyaging through time itself in some bombastic contraption or another. Now, however, instead of being by himself in these fantasies or having his neighborhood pals with him or else some strange alien creatures who would serve as his aide-de-camps, he envisioned hot women whom he would protect. Women like the cheerleaders or Hef's Playmates or the young teenage Swedish girls in his father's nudist magazines. That vision of space travel immortality and time travel with a beautiful babe on his arm and several more waiting in the wings for him to return from his latest intergalactic conquest was very ennobling and empowering indeed.

Tripping out on all of this took most of the next two hours. It was in the fourth and final hour while waiting for the show to get out and for Bob Neet to return to pick them up that even Carl's youthful legs began to give out. He decided to hit the refreshment stand and to kill time just rubbernecking around the park in general. He made it to the end of the acre long place and purchased some green moon cheese gum and a rainbow snow cone from someone he really couldn't see very well. Carl was wool-gathering when the oddly inflected voice of the half-seen counter person softly asked him "So, young man, do you like this place?"

Carl replied, "Yes sir, I sure do."

"I mean the artwork, you like artwork ,don't you? I watched you study it like you have a fascination. Do you know artwork?"

"I like comic books and I like Ed "Big Daddy" Roth's Rat Fink and I like..."

"No I mean do you like the artwork of this place?" the counter person asked again.

"Very much so, it's real twitchin."

"This twitchin', is that good?"

"You bet, sir, that means it is A-1."

"I paint all this. I make all this. I, Armando, make all this with my own hands, from my own mind."

"Wow, that's wonderful, mister ,so you're an artist? I've met a few of those and I talk to Walt Disney out at Disneyland all the time when I visit there."

“Yes, he is an artist even though he makes others do the real work for him now. I remember the Mickey Mouse and the live action girl in cartoons, he actually drew some of those but me I build and paint and create all this myself. Me, I’m an artist and such as this place I have done elsewhere in the Midwestern United States too. Besides this, I’m hanging my own canvases in real art galleries in New York and in the L.A. County Museum of Art. So different from these I do but they are in my head and you might also want to be making with the art someday.”

“Yeah, I’ve thought about it a lot but then I’ve always wanted to act and direct even more than that, you know, like that Orson Welles guy.”

“Oh that’s nice too, but an artist you should perhaps be thinking on becoming, because I see this on you. It’s in the way you look at the artworks of this place. The way you study those girl’s bodies and the folds in their clothing. You have the eye, you have the taste, you have the imagination,” he said, moving now out from the obscurity of the refreshment stand and into the shattered light of the mom and pop amusement park.

When he did so, Carl suddenly noticed that he didn’t quite look as human as he had seemed before. Maybe it had been because Carl wasn’t paying that much attention to him and was only half concentrating. It was at least obvious to Carl that his new acquaintance was not a natural born American citizen. Even as unusual as that was in the Orange County of that time that didn’t account for the shock of recognition that went up Carl’s spine, lighting it up like a pin-ball machine as it delivered its payload to his cerebellum. This “man’s” foreignness was something far beyond the fact that he wasn’t born anywhere in the USA. At first glance he appeared to be some kind of Asian type, perhaps a Filipino gentleman like Carl’s family’s gardener whose children Carl had gone through grade school with before their family had moved away. No, what had made him look so different was the shape of his elongated skull ill-concealed beneath a beret and the strange tentacle-like fingers that held his cigarette in its holder. What really gave him away were his eyes which were extremely reptilian and looked like they didn’t belong in a human skull at all. For most people in Orange County Armando would have been an invisible man since he was about as far from being the kind of guy you saw on the Saturday Evening Post covers by Norman Rockwell back then as you could get. Most people would have tried to freeze him out or if they had looked at him very much

at all they would have noticed that he was foreign, possibly deformed and looked like some kind of a beatnik to boot. Only someone of Carl's way-out peculiar sensibilities would have figured out exactly what he was and even more so what he wasn't.

"So you like outer space?" Armando asked.

"I sure do."

"Like to go there someday?"

You bet!"

"Think there's any life out there?"

"Uh, what do you think, sir?"

"See all those stars up in the sky there, boy? Every one is a sun like the earth's sun and all of them have planets orbiting around them so why should all or at least most of them planets not have life on them? Could be like the people on earth, maybe different it doesn't matter."

"That would be swell if that was true," Carl enthused, happy to find anyone else who was also into the possibility of extraterrestrial life even if they were someone this weird.

"And I suppose you would like to go into space some day?" Armando queried exhaling a blue cloud of cigarette smoke through his nostrils.

"Sure, why not? That's bound to happen. First to the moon, then Mars. Why hell, I mean heck, I expect to live my final days in an old folk's home on Saturn or someplace."

"Bull crap!" the older man spat. "You folks will get to the moon a few times alright. Send a few probes to Mars too but that's about it. You are going shoot your wad in a place called Vietnam that most people have never heard of yet, killing people who look a lot like Armando and there goes your so-called space race. Doesn't matter anyway, they don't want you out there anyways; they would never allow it." Armando saw that his pronouncements had almost reduced Carl to tears so he added, "Listen, boy, if you want to travel through space, through time, the only way to do it on this mud ball is be an artist. That's the only rocket ship or time machine you'll ever own and remember, boy, you will be an artist, there is no way it can't happen now, you just have no choice. It's closing time now so get the hell out of here."

With that the Moon Park's lights all mysteriously shut off all at the same time. Carl fumbled his way in the darkness out of the place and then hurried across the parking lot to join Biggie and Dave for an uncomfortable

ride home with Bob Neet who somehow knew without being told that Carl had not gone to the show as he was supposed to.

The next morning Carl awoke with the worst case of mumps imaginable and by the time he had recovered, several weeks had passed during which he thought long and hard about all that had transpired at the Moon Park. So it was when he finally regained the strength to ride his Schwinn bike back to that place on an October Saturday, he found that it had been torn down and that workmen were white-washing over the wonderful mural. Before they could finish their handiwork a very hurt and confused Carl retrieved a small notebook from his back pocket and copied down Armando Alpaca's signature as well as several alien looking hieroglyphics he had put beneath his name and then remorsefully pedaled back home as a gathering thunderstorm announced the end of his childhood.

Carl thought about this incident often over the years but it never really made any kind of literal sense to him. As best as he could determine from his research, there never had been a Moon Park at that location in Garden Grove nor anything that ever resembled it.

Carl Frost had gone Hollywood in 1984; there was no other way to put it. He had gone in the course of one week from being a janitor who scrounged aluminum cans from dumpsters in his off hours to being the West Coast Editor for a major comic book trade magazine who also had a hip and hungered for indy parody comic book coming out imminently. The best part of it all was how instantly he had been accepted into the West Coast community of comic book creators and how fast they had come to treat him as some long lost brother. Yes, in some ways the socializing was the best and most heady part of the whole experience. To sit and break bread with people he had idolized as stars for years was ego boasting in the truest sense of the word.

The first time he went out for authentic Filipino food with Armando Alpaca they had also brought along Patrick Yen and Tim Lawson and these four who were in the process of becoming a family to one another were having a blast shooting the breeze and sketching on the paper placemats. They were fascinated by Carl who, it seemed, had come out of nowhere hard and fast and they were pumping him for info. Carl had been drinking heavily that night in addition to flying high on the prescription downers that he now took on a daily basis and he was in rare form.

“I’m afraid I don’t know much about you, Carl,” said Armando softly. “I’ve seen you around many times before over the years in comic book shops and at comic cons but we’ve said little to each other. Tell us about yourself, why don’t you?”

So prompted, Carl told them about his interesting life and all the people that he had met and all the many things that he had done. The other three listened and smiled as they continued to sketch away and to eat course after course of the delicious and unusual authentic Filipino food which Carl had never encountered before. Then the subject of the supernatural came up and the other three had their stories, of course, especially old Armando which wasn’t weird since he was the greatest horror comic book illustrator ever. Then it was Carl’s turn and Tim and Patrick’s jaws dropped as he reeled off one incident after another that he swore had happened to him personally. Carl told them of all the ghosts that he had seen, haunted houses he had been in, how he had been abducted by a UFO when he was a kid. Carl continued to ramble on, reeling off occult occurrence after occult occurrence until he came to one that he had been wanting to broach with Armando ever since the elderly man had first befriended him a few weeks back.

“I think you and I first met back in 1963. I think you built and were helping to run a kiddy-land in Garden Grove called the Moon Park where we had a long talk about art and space travel and stuff.”

“Nonsense! I was still in the Philippines at that time and although I wanted desperately to come stateside I hadn’t up to that point been able to formulate a plan to do so.”

“Well then maybe it was some relative of yours, perhaps you are a junior like me?”

“Of my immediate family I was the first one to come stateside a decade ago and I was the only one of us named Armando. It was my mother’s idea and she could never explain why she wanted to do that. She said she almost felt forced into it somehow.”

Then as was Armando’s wont he tried to top Carl’s stories. “Speaking of such weirdness, did I ever tell you how I met someone many years ago when I was still a small boy in short pants? He came a few times to my father’s carpentry shop when I was young and brought me pencils and pads of paper and Crayolas and he gave me a big stack of this Quality Comics by

Lou Fine. It was the first time I had ever heard of Lou Fine and that man told me an artist I should become.”

While Armando was saying all this he was doing an elaborate sketch with his self-invented fountain brush of the man he was talking about. Carl looked at it upside down and then almost rudely snatched up the paper placemat which he couldn’t help staring at it with an open mouth. He trembled for a while as he looked at it because it was a perfect likeness of him!

“When I knew this guy as a kid he claimed he was Carl Frost. This is very puzzling indeed. Who was this man and what was he about anyway?”

“Yeah and why did he look like me before I was even born and maybe later you, before you’d ever come to America if it was the same person?”

“Maybe he didn’t want you to see him as he really was for some reason,” Armando said, trying to be helpful. “Perhaps he was of the UFO or maybe a ghost or a demon of some kind? We’ll never know for sure. Maybe we’ll be able to figure it out if we all put our heads together but not tonight. It’s raining hard and it’s late and besides there is still much good food to be eaten and many more stories to be swapped. So dig in and enjoy your most delicious crispy chicken, my large friend. We will have many more days to puzzle over what all this means and how it all binds us together.”

Armando was right because of course he was very wise. Still they never did come to any agreed upon conclusion as to what their contact with alien life forms really meant or why these “strange visitors from another planet” wanted them to be cartoonists as well as such close friends. Carl thought often over the decades about that man of mystery who looked exactly like and said he was Armando Alpaca and maybe even him too whom he had once met on a moon that briefly orbited Chris N Pitts and the Grove Theater.

When he was very old Carl stopped cartooning after Armando died and became a published poet and writer of short stories. All of his long and unusual life eventually found its way into the guts of these new works. Eventually he was asked to write something about aliens for a new book his publishers would be putting out soon. He could have lied but he didn’t. He could have created pure fiction but he did not. The truth is stranger and more wonderful than that and so he had put it down exactly as he had lived it. Yet he was still glad that he had the option of telling people that he had

made it all up because after all who was really going to believe that he was one of the first people to visit the moon six years before Neal Armstrong came in peace to it for all of mankind?

## THE ALIEN

*Neil Leckman*

We walked without masks and suits so long ago  
We could breathe the air, feel the snow  
Let the sun and wind caress our skin  
We were part of things and all fit in  
We walk as strangers in now forlorn  
Aliens in the place that we were born  
We scorched the earth and soiled the air  
We were fools and didn't take care  
Now we are the ones who don't fit in  
That makes you and I the alien.

## SPACED INVADERS

*Nathan J.D.L. Rowark*

“So I’m out there, and the lights hit me-bam!” said Joel.

Leroy smiled. “You’re a crazy cat, man.”

“Fire, lights in the sky,” Joel continued. “Police were nowhere.”

“Nowhere?” Leroy checked.

“I mean nowhere,” said Joel. “Could have been a riot going on, the whole city ablaze and they wouldn’t have seen it.”

“That ain’t normal, man,” Leroy agreed. “And this was all because of hypnotic suggestion?”

“All because of alien intervention,” Joel corrected. “I was on this bridge, as we are now. You can see for miles, right?”

“Yeah, miles,” Leroy nodded. “But hold on, how did you get out here anyways, without a car?”

Joel raised his hands to the sky. “They gave me a lift.”

“In the spaceship?” asked Leroy.

Joel appeared deadly serious.

“You’re crazy, man. What’s wrong with you? Too much alcohol and other substances? What is it?”

Leroy began to stagger into the path of passers-by.

“Watch out, this man’s drunk!” he said, pointing in Joel’s direction. “Says that some illuminate aliens give him a (hiccup) piggyback ride to the stars.”

Joel looked angry. “Whatever, man. When they come for you don’t ask me for help, okay? Got no brain to suck anyway.”

Leroy watched as his friend zig-zagged into oncoming traffic. Not seeing him, an unobservant Ford veered in Joel’s direction. Leroy watched from across the way, helpless. Just as the vehicle touched his legs, Joel began to rise up into the sky. A bright light came from the clouds as he remained suspended.

“Told you, dude, stupid crack head!” shouted Joel to his friend.

Leroy closed his eyes to try and get them clear.

“Son of a bitch was right,” he realised, as Joel drifted into the distance, waving his middle finger.

## **THIS LITTLE PIGGY...**

***Ken Goldman***

*Like a true nature's child  
We were born, born to be wild...  
Steppenwolf (1968)*

Lab days were the worst for Kooper whose stomach wasn't always up to the task when time came to inspect the gooey innards of assorted frogs and cats. Carver High's seniors called Wednesday's laboratory period Brown Bag Day because when Dr. Tompkins handed out those paper bags they were not intended for lunches going 'in' but for breakfasts coming 'out.'

But in February the dreaded day improved significantly when Tompkins paired Kooper with Rochelle Greene as his lab partner. Carver's standard issue lab coat had all the appeal of a nun's habit, but just knowing those juicy mammarys heaved somewhere beneath Rochelle's starched whites provided Kooper with enough wood to warm his BVD's the entire afternoon.

"Hey, Kooper. You ready to cut us some pig?" Rochelle greeted him with her best Daisy Duke accent as they took seats behind their dissecting tray. One smile from her made the thought of slicing into today's pig fetus seem genuinely erotic.

"In the immortal words of Larry the Cable Guy, let's 'Get 'er done!'"  
Smooth.

Kooper examined the tools spread out upon their table: a pair of scissors and gloves, a scalpel, a blunt probe and needle probe, forceps and that notorious brown bag. Rochelle slipped her hands into the plastic gloves like a debutante attending a summer ball, creating a mental snapshot guaranteed to remain in Kooper's psyche until the last tooth fell out of his head.

Dr. Tompkins was probably born wearing laboratory whites, but the instructor almost bordered on cool if you overlooked his thinning hair and bad teeth. He enjoyed talking up this fetal pig exercise a little more than seemed healthy, but that was probably just a teacher thing like how Mr. Hermann practically ejaculated into his boxers over Shakespeare. Vomit inducing as it was, animal dissection seemed radical in its own Dr. Demento

way. And Tompkins did pair Kooper with Rochelle, an act Kooper considered worthy of sainthood.

“Today you’ll be examining in some detail the external and internal anatomy of genus *Sus scrofa*, a fetal pig. As a mammal, many aspects of its structural and functional organization are identical with those of other mammals, including humans, and our study is, in a very real sense, a study of our own organs. Of course, I’m not counting those organs inside our wrestling team.”

Rochelle seemed engrossed. Kooper leaned forward, hands on his chin, simulating interest too, although much more intriguing was the thought of his partner’s ample rack.

“The fetuses you will use in the following weeks were salvaged from pregnant sows being slaughtered for food. So ladies, unless you belong to the religious far right, there’s no need to shed tears over what may initially seem an act of cruelty.” There were murmurs, and Tompkins grinned. “That goes for you men, too. There will be no bitching about today’s politically incorrect lesson, okay? Today, we’re scientists!” He walked to the large freezer and removed several plastic containers holding see-through bags. To occasional groans of disgust, Tompkins deposited fetal pigs all around like Christmas turkeys.

Rochelle opened the plastic bag and inspected the slimy remains, slick with preservative. The thing looked more like a blood soaked Kermit than Miss Piggy. Placing the bag’s contents in the tray she turned to Kooper. “Do we give it a name? Petunia? Sir Francis Bacon? Anna Nicole?”

“Anything but Babe. I couldn’t live with that.”

That smile again. Rochelle handed him the scalpel. “Dr. Kooper, if you would be so kind as to slice open our little friend...”

Tompkins appeared over the boy’s shoulder.

“Mr. Kooper, careful. Never cut or move more than is necessary to expose a given part. You’re not making a sandwich, okay? Here’s your map.” He handed Kooper a color photograph with diagrams and labels of what he should expect to find inside his piglet. Tompkins patted the tiny head of the fetus, grinning. “That’ll do, pig,” he said, and walked off.

Kooper made his incision as the diagram showed. There was a small squirt of sticky goo and the cut wasn’t as neat as he would have liked, nothing close to what he knew would score points with his lab partner. But he didn’t ralph his Egg McMuffin either, and that was a plus.

“Nothing to it,” he told his partner. “I’m picturing this is one of The Jonas Brothers.”

“Don’t let him bite.” Rochelle leaned close, and her honey hair brushed Kooper’s cheek. “Remember what happened to Peter Parker. Pig-Man doesn’t really cut it as a super hero.”

“Maybe I’ll call myself Peter Porker? Champion of the cloven hoofed!”

“Keep slicing that ham, boy. I’ll be right here quietly getting nauseous.”

*Damn, she smells good.*

*Damn...*

*“Damn!!”*

Kooper’s scalpel hit something hard as stone, something that wasn’t supposed to be there according to the diagram. Maybe he had located skeletal bone or some abnormality. He bore down on the scalpel, putting more pressure into his incision. Whatever pig goo was inside, the organ wouldn’t budge. He grabbed the forceps to separate the stomach, folding the flaps over like thick slices of lunch meat.

“Take a look; tell me what you see here. Then tell me I’m not crazy.”

The two looked at the pig’s innards, then at the diagram, back to the pig, then at each other.

“Kooper, this isn’t right, is it? Nothing’s where it’s supposed to be. And the organs’ shapes -- they’re all wrong.”

Kooper probed the fetus, and something was gonzo, all right. None of the pig’s organs resembled the diagrams and what looked like its heart couldn’t have been its heart... because there were two of them. The innards seemed almost landscaped; a topiary of sculptured guts, and the organs weren’t soft and squishy either. They felt almost solid. Exploring with her own blunt probe, Rochelle’s face turned white.

“Kooper, feel this heart and tell me I’m not crazy. This is its heart, isn’t it?”

“One of them.” He touched the instrument to the organ. Touched it to the second heart alongside its identical twin. He felt a light thump, felt his mouth go dry.

“I think it’s beating,” he said. “Holy shit! Both of them are!”

“There’s nothing holy going on here, Kooper. What is this thing?”

“It’s not pig. Not like any pig I’ve ever seen. Not its insides, anyway.”

“How many pigs’ insides have you seen?”

“Counting today? That would be none.”

Outwardly the creature seemed too amorphous to positively identify it as much of anything. It certainly could have been a pig, at least a pig dipped in cherry jelly. But it was only a fetus, and if you looked closely at it, it could have been something else too.

“Maybe it’s some kind of pig freak, some anomaly like Jo-Jo the dog boy at the circus?”

“Jo-Jo the dog boy doesn’t look like this on the inside, Rochelle. Nothing I know does.”

Dr. Tompkins stood clear across the laboratory overseeing the dumber kids’ table. Kooper leaned close to Rochelle.”

“I think we may have something here, something really big. You think Tompkins will just toss this thing into the garbage, not give it a second thought? Maybe when pigs learn to tap dance. The man probably could retire with what we have in this tray. And maybe so can we! Or at least cover a few years’ tuition. No one else comes to this party, okay?”

Rochelle managed a grin. “You’re a swine, Kooper. You know that, don’t you?”

He snorted.

Reason kicked in and Rochelle turned pragmatist. “Maybe Tompkins’ diagram is wrong. Maybe some pigs’ insides are supposed to look like this? I mean, it’s possible, isn’t it?”

“I doubt other pigs in this room have hearts that are still beating. Unless you want to count Martha Harrad.” Kooper looked around, walked over to the desk alongside theirs where flat-chested Penny Albertson and pimpled Stanley Halpern were busy slicing away at organs that looked normal to him. Same thing at the next table. He returned to Rochelle, grabbed one of the brown barf bags. “I think time’s come we consider a pignapping. There are other fetuses in Tompkins’ freezer. We can make a switch. Little Baco Bits here goes into the bag.”

They would be taking a huge risk. Dr. Tompkins would be tearing new assholes if he found one of his fetals had been pilfered. He had a thing about specimens leaving the lab because last term Arnold Fonaroff discovered one of his instructor’s pig fetuses served up in his lunch tray.

Across the room Debbie Katz started losing her breakfast. Tompkins always assisted when things got messy in the lab, and Debbie’s timing

proved perfect. Rochelle shoved their fetal pig - or whatever it was - into the brown bag. Kooper managed to sneak off to the freezer to poach their specimen's understudy. He returned to their station and plopped the remains into the dissecting tray. Rochelle transferred the first specimen from beneath her lab coat into her book bag, and the fetal pig-thing disappeared like a magic trick.

Kooper savored every clandestine moment. "You and me, no one else. Oink once for yes."

"You want a signature in blood too?"

"We'll negotiate bodily fluids later. My place after school? Just to figure this thing out, plan our next move over some primo weed? I'll go online, do some research. I smell Nobel Prize here, Rochelle. Or at least the National Enquirer."

"What you smell is a dead pig decomposing in my book bag. I have cheerleading practice after school, but I can come tonight. I'll bring our little pal."

"...who may not be dead or a pig."

Rochelle went white again. Brainy girls always had annoying second thoughts while breaking school rules, and Rochelle's GPA could bogus this whole adventure.

"Listen, Kooper, maybe we shouldn't be doing this."

Kooper leaned close to her. How could any girl smell so incredible? He could break every rule in the book for another whiff of her honey scented tresses. Had he possessed two hearts like their fetal companion he would have loved her with both of them.

"Rochelle Greene, Nobel Prize winner," he whispered to her. She gave an oh-what-the-hell shrug and strapped her bag tightly shut.

"Maybe when pigs fly."

The bell rang. Kooper wore a shit eating grin, cupped his hand to his ear at the sound.

"Somewhere in Heaven a pig is getting its wings."

Smooth.

~~~

Kooper watched the sun set from inside his tree house. When he was seven his father had built this retreat just for him in the old oak behind the house.

The man had been handy with tools, a talent his son unfortunately had not inherited. His father also proved handy in other areas with Mrs. Sylvia Tidwell who lived down the street and with whom he had proven especially talented with one tool in particular. Stanley Kooper packed his bags a week following his son's tenth birthday. Tonight Kooper's mother had gone out on yet another of what seemed an endless stream of first dates with a new online stranger. Kooper hoped, at least for tonight, that Match.com's latest candidate didn't prove a creep and that she would be coming home late.

A high intensity lantern kept the tree house well illuminated after the sun went down. The enclosure was large enough to accommodate an old Sony boom box, a space heater and a cooler for the requisite beer Kooper occasionally craved. In a secret compartment beneath the air mattress he kept a considerable stash of weed for those times a beer didn't suffice, as well as a good assortment of Penthouse and Hustler Magazines for when the weed didn't. The cooler contained its own guilty pleasures too, a couple of Snapple six packs and a handful of frozen Milky Ways. It could easily hold a lot more, if necessary. Tonight it would be necessary.

Kooper emptied the cooler. He did the same with a can of Coors.

Rochelle's Mustang pulled into the driveway at 7:30. She was headed for the front door when Kooper called to her.

“Sooooooooo-eeeeeeeeee! Sooooooooooooo-eeeeeee!”

She looked up.

“It's a pig call. You like it?”

“It's making me wet. How do I get up there with this bag of bacon I'm hauling?”

“Toss it, then climb like the Amazon I know you are.”

Rochelle tossed and climbed. She looked around, nodded her approval, joining Kooper sitting Indian style on the mattress.

“So this is your Fortress of Solitude, is it, Kal-el?”

“Welcome to the sanctuary of Pig-Man. Speaking of which...”

Rochelle's attention turned to the Nike box in front of him. “I had to transfer him to the box. He leaked through Tompkins' barf bag. I think he's pretty much defrosted by now. But there's a couple of things you should see.”

She pulled off a rubber band and slid the lid from the box, and the two looked inside. The realization took a moment for Kooper to assimilate

“How could he grow so much in a few hours? Fuck me, he looks twice as big.”

“There’s more. Look closer. His eyes...”

“-They’re open!!”

“You notice anything else?”

It took another moment to sink in.

“Where’s the incision? Christ, this morning we had his stomach sliced wide open!”

“I believe the proper term for what’s happening here is regeneration. I would imagine all those Trekkie years you put in would explain that much.”

Rochelle had a point. The fetus no longer seemed a fetus. It had developed into something else. Just what that was Kooper could only guess.

Rochelle closed the lid, fastened the rubber band around it. “Okay, class. Who wants to explain just what freak of nature we have lurking inside teacher’s Nike box? You, young Skywalker?”

Cute, even though she probably was scared shitless. Kooper liked that.

“I think I can explain what it isn’t. It isn’t a pig. Pigs don’t regenerate or bacon would be a whole lot cheaper. Then again, it could be a pig. Just not the kind of pig whose pork chops you would want at your dinner table.”

“Thanks for clearing that up.”

“Think outside of the shoe box, okay? Dr. Tompkins mentioned his fetuses were taken from sows raised for slaughter, right? Those sows had to be kept in pens their whole lives, and a whole lot of them were probably bunched together getting fattened with pig slop as they waited for the big day. Suppose something got into that pen with them, something not quite a pig but close enough biologically to mate with one of them? Something alien and pig-like itself that wanted to mate - or needed to mate - wouldn’t be interested in us tree apes, no more than we would be drawn to a porker. And suppose the way this alien pig-thing got into the pen was the same way it got out?”

Rochelle considered Kooper’s hypothesis for a full three seconds. “Right. An alien from some distant star beams down here just to fuck a pig? That’s not setting the cosmic bar very high, is it? What have you been smoking?”

“You said it, not me, Lieutenant Ripley.”

“Get real. Aliens porking pigs? We have mutant ninja pigs in our midst? Maybe when pigs really do fly.”

“Exactly! Pigs in space!”

Just saying it sounded ludicrous. The two almost laughed themselves sick. And then they stopped.

...because the box on the floor thumped. Rochelle stared hard at Kooper.

“Okay, this is officially getting weird.”

“You want to peek inside?”

“I’ll take a pass, thanks. I don’t feel like peeing my pants just right now.”

Kooper spotted his chance. He put his arm around her.

“Don’t be scared. He’s in there, and I’m here.”

Rochelle managed a giggle. “Now I’m really scared.”

They shared smiles, sat silent for a moment. Kooper risked a kiss.

“Still scared?”

“Petrified.”

They kissed again, harder, longer. Within minutes they were doing a lot more.

Kooper heard the sound first, light thumps, then scratching and the snap of a rubber band. He didn’t feel like stopping what he had started, but he had to look. Straightening her tube top Rochelle pulled herself up too.

The lid of the shoe box slipped free. The tiny head drenched in its own slime emerged. With difficulty the pig-thing managed to slither out leaving a trail of pink muck that Kooper and Rochelle could only stare at. It crawled close to Rochelle’s leg. She kicked at it.

“Shit, Kooper! Shitshitshit!!”

Kooper lunged for the squirming mass of flesh, grabbing it with both hands. He felt he had snatched some large jelly fish, and the thing struggled trying to slip through his fingers. “Drag that cooler over here!” He dropped the gelatinous thing inside, slamming the lid.

Screeeeeeeeeeeee!! Screeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!!

It thumped violently against the styrofoam, its shrieks ear piercing. Kooper worried it might kick its way out. He sat on the cooler’s lid, felt the wild vibrations of its pounding travel up his ass. The little fucker was trying to push through the cap.

“Turn on the boom box!”

“Huh?”

“Just do it! Let the neighbors bitch about my stereo, not this screaming little shit!”

Screeeeeeeeeeeee!! Screeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!!

Rochelle hit the Sony’s PLAY button. Steppenwolf were bragging how they were born to be wild. Rochelle turned up the volume as high as it would go. The pig-thing’s screeching jacked up in volume too. The high pitched shrieks got the neighbors’ dogs barking from all sides.

“Kooper, what are we going to do?”

“How do you feel about singing along with Steppenwolf?”

It wasn’t an entirely bad idea.

The shrieking continued for a long time. Eventually the pig-thing must have tired itself out. Exhausted, Kooper sat alongside Rochelle, both staring at nothing, saying nothing.

Then something else...

Another noise.

Rochelle spoke what Kooper was thinking.

“Now what...?”

The sound was throaty and raw like a liquid sonic boom, but it didn’t come from the cooler. At first the thick snort was almost indistinguishable, but it quickly grew louder. Then much louder. Kooper jumped, spun around. Rochelle grabbed him, held him with both arms, tight. He held her right back.

“Christ! What is that? Do your neighbors own a brontosaurus?”

Kooper reached for the boom box, placing it on the cooler to hold the lid. The piglet’s attempts to escape had stopped anyway, but now the decibels of this new reverberation were outdoing Kooper’s Sony.

“It’s coming from below. I have a feeling our friend inside the cooler knows what it is.” He grabbed Rochelle’s hand and they looked through the tree house window. In the garden the soil was spitting like a small geyser. The dirt separated as if something large was trying to dig itself out.

And then something did.

For one insane moment Kooper wanted to believe he saw Mrs. Goldschmidt’s dumb ass Saint Bernard that somehow had managed to plow itself into a hole inside his mother’s tulip bed. He grabbed the lantern, aimed its beam below. He saw... something. Thick bristles covered patches of pinkish flesh. Its heavy snorts suggested this wasn’t anything close to

man's best friend. But Kooper had a good idea of what might be sniffing at the tree trunk below. Caught in the moonlight, the thing looked the size of a bear.

"No pigs from space, Rochelle. Maybe something worse."

"What-what are you talking about?"

He didn't have to explain because they could see for themselves. This was a spawn of old Mother Earth, something released from deep inside her bowels. But there had to be more to the story, and Kooper gave the runaway train of his thoughts a voice.

"I got it wrong! A female must have climbed into that pig pen and got herself knocked up. Those pig slaughterers must have ripped her fetus from her thinking she had been dead with her throat cut, or whatever it is they do to kill pigs. In the dark among all those other pigs, maybe she looked like the others, but she's not... she's not! She made her getaway burrowing back through the dirt and regenerated just like her bloody pig fetus. And I'm thinking that Mama wants her baby back ribs, she wants that baby back bad. And here she is!"

"We're safe up here, aren't we? I mean, she can't possibly climb—"

But the sow thing was struggling to climb up the tree, its talons clutching at the bark and pulling its bulk toward them. Inside the cooler the piglet was screeching again. Rochelle looked behind her at the cooler, then spun back to watch the dark lump moving towards them.

"Pigs can't climb trees! They can't!"

"I may be guessing here, but I'm thinking this one can."

"Shit! Shitshitshit!"

"I don't think she's interested in us. Unless she's a big fan of Steppenwolf, I think we've got a mother and child reunion going on here. A mother hears her baby cry, she comes running. Or burrowing. You know what today is, don't you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The date. Do you know today's date?"

"I don't know. February 2nd, I think. Kooper, we're going to die and you're asking me what day it is?"

A flat round snout the size of a basketball pushed through the door. The hinges gave way and the head shoved into the enclosure. Its mouth dripping thick gouts of saliva, the sow-thing stared at them cowering by the

window. nostrils flaring, she tried wriggling all the way through the entrance. Then she spotted the cooler.

Screeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!

Screeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!!

The piglet chorus started again, but the shrieks took on an urgency unlike before. The massive sow-thing answered with a fog horn howl that rattled the small enclosure as if a subway were passing through. Kooper took Rochelle's hand, backed away from the window.

"It's February 2nd, Rochelle. Today is Groundhog Day!"

"That's no groundhog. Christ, Kooper, that's fucking Sasquash!!"

"Bigfoot, Barney the Dinosaur, I don't care. I think it might be a good idea to open that cooler now or she's going to be dissecting us."

Ass-crawling to the cooler, Kooper removed the boom box and pulled open the lid. He kicked the styrofoam container toward the she-creature still squirming to get through the entrance. The fetal piglet slithered from the cooler's lip and towards its mother like some misshapen Slinky. It climbed upon her back assisted by a few maternal nudges. Once firmly secured it gurgled contentedly. The sow turned to lick the residual gunk from her young one.

Rochelle had rolled herself into fetal position. The irony wasn't lost on Kooper. He got to his feet, approached the mother-creature.

"Okay, you got what you came for! Go back now. You saw your shadow. Six more weeks of winter. I get it!"

The sow snorted, gave her small passenger another maternal lick. She took him in her mouth and was gone. Kooper watched her burrow through the dirt and disappear into the earth like some prehistoric mole. For all he knew maybe that was exactly what she was. It didn't matter anymore. Groundhog, pig, or Creature from the Black Lagoon, she was out of here. He turned toward Rochelle. She was shaking badly. He touched her shoulder.

"I think that's the end. Finis. Roll credits."

He glanced at the garden below to be certain. The tulip bed was a wreck. His mom was probably going to kill him. It was a ridiculous concern given what they had been through, but Kooper had taken from his experience a new respect for motherhood. He turned his attention back to Rochelle.

"Well? Do I deliver a good time, or what?"

“This didn’t happen. It couldn’t have happened. It’s too crazy!”

“I’m pretty sure if we tell anyone about this, they’ll lock up both of us and melt the key.” Rochelle seemed about to lose it. Kooper reached for the six pack; coaxed a Coors from it and handed it to her.

“Tonight we just listened to some loud ‘60’s music in my humble tree house. We smoked some weed, had a beer or two; maybe sucked some face. The usual shit. Tomorrow we get notes to excuse us from the rest of Tompkins’ dissection labs. I’ll get my mother to swear I’m Amish. I hear next week Tompkins is thinking of bringing in fetal cows.”

Smooth.

Rochelle managed a semblance of composure. In another moment she would be Rochelle Greene again, female extraordinaire. He had no doubt of that.

“Kooper, I have to ask you something, okay?”

“Share.”

Rochelle leaned against him, put her head on his shoulder, and sipped her beer.

“Would you turn off that boom box? I really hate Steppenwolf.”

~~~

Her young one was sleeping. That was good. She had almost lost him.

The little one had been through quite an ordeal today. But there remained a task she had not completed, and time was running out. So few males remained of their kind, so few left to produce young. She would have to act quickly. She would have to act tonight.

The female bore through the soil again. It was a difficult and dangerous journey tunneling to the surface, but some things could not wait. Tonight she would find another mate, perhaps the large canine she had spotted earlier near the humans’ flower bed. So many four legged creatures, such a variety from which to choose.

But so often the four legged kind proved difficult to force into mating with her. Nature seemed odd in that way; and mating often proved futile, even treacherous. Many males fought her and clawed, sometimes hurting her. This was a chance she must take. There was little time.

Closer to the surface now. Much closer...

Perhaps, she considered, there were other solutions, other choices for her.

Perhaps, this next time, if another four legged male struggled or ran off, if it refused to mate with her...

Then perhaps she should find something else, make a different selection.

Yes, she could do that. She could find something slower, weaker.

She could do that tonight.

Tonight she would select something with two legs.

## THE HOUSE AT DARK MOUNTAIN

*Kevin L. Jones*

All of my life I had thought that whenever I had heard anyone utter the phrase “they are after me or they are coming to get me” that it was a sure sign that somebody was hopelessly and incurably mad. As I sit here typing these words to you on my laptop I can hardly believe that I am doing so. They are coming to get me tonight and I will never see you again, my son. I know that the news of my passing will not greatly disturb you given that I have not really been any sort of a father to you but instead I write to you as a warning. As my sole living relative, you will inherit the farmhouse in Vermont. I beg you to forget that you have ever heard of this forsaken place after you have read this account and to never under any circumstances come here.

The horror that shall end my life all began last April when your Grandfather Akeley died. Being his only child I inherited his home in San Diego along with a farmhouse in Vermont that I had never heard of. I thought it strange that my father had never mentioned this place to me during his lifetime and I resolved that at the first opportunity that I would head down to Vermont to investigate this mysterious holding that our family owned. However I had to wait until classes had ended for the summer at Miskatonic University where I had recently taken a position as Professor of American history.

When summer break started I immediately set out for Vermont; not only was I curious about the house but from what I could tell about the region from my online investigations of the area, it was still quite underdeveloped and remote. As you know I have always been an avid outdoorsman and thought that this would be a perfect opportunity to indulge in my passion and so I loaded up my fishing pole, tackle and hunting rifle and headed across country to the old farmhouse. My only traveling companions were my two German Shepherds, Blondie and Herman.

During my road trip I kept having a strange feeling of dread. Something in the back of my mind told me that I was headed into danger. I tried to tell myself that it was nothing; that I had been subtlety influenced by the absurdities that I had read on the internet about the region. When you enter the words Dark Mountain, Vermont into your search engine; the place

where the farmhouse is situated; literally dozens of websites crop up like mushrooms on a dunghill. According to these online conspiracy theorists the ominously named mountain is an outpost for an alien race from the planet Yuggoth which is supposedly their name for Pluto. These beings in the distant reaches of the solar system were supposedly crustacean in appearance with a pair of large bat-like wings. These creatures were purported to jealously guard their privacy and anyone who wandered into their lands would either be found dead or never be heard from again. I dismissed this as mere internet nonsense but still the uneasy feeling did not leave me.

Finally I arrived at the farmhouse and was quite happy at how well maintained my father's house was. According to the probate attorney that had furnished me with a set of keys for the place, my father had engaged the services of a handyman from a nearby farm to look after the house. The farmhouse lacked most of the modern conveniences but was otherwise fine. When I arrived there it was nearly dark. I decided I would get a good night's rest then in the morning I would explore the nearby woods. During my first evening at the farmhouse nothing out of the ordinary occurred and I awoke feeling much refreshed. I took a long walk in the woods and found an idyllic stream where I spent most of the day fishing.

When I headed back to the house with my catch I noticed a strange set of tracks on the forest trail. I had been an outdoorsman all of my life but I could not identify the set of prints. Upon returning to the farmhouse, my dogs that I had left tied up in the yard seemed nervous and fidgety. I decided that they would sleep in the house with me that night and that I would keep my rifle handy. Just after two a.m. I was awakened by the sound of someone or something landing on the roof. These reverberations sent my dogs into a frenzy they began to bark and growl and would not be quieted.

I arose from bed and went to the front door. I opened the door just a crack and peered out into the moonless night. I saw strange shapes scuttling in the darkness. My dog Herman bolted out the door. I then heard him snarl and the sound of a struggle. Then a cry of pain that was so alien in nature that I lack the words to describe it. Herman returned to me with a large crab-like appendage clutched in his mouth that dripped a horrid smelling green liquid. I slammed the door shut behind my dog and for a moment I just stood there, unable to believe what was happening to me.

Then, after what to me seemed like a long time, I finally worked up enough courage to peer out the nearby window into the night. The glass exploded inwards and I was nearly struck in the head by a bullet. I threw myself flat and nearly missed being hit by a barrage of incoming rounds. I crawled on my belly and retrieved my rifle from the bedroom; now armed I returned to the window and fired back at the muzzle flashes as well as the horrid inhuman shapes that scurried across the darkened lawn.

This continued until almost dawn, then I began to hear a chorus of both human and alien sounding buzzing voices, taunting me. They shouted that I had trespassed on the land of the Outer Ones and had committed murder. They promised that they would return with the setting of the sun and that soon my life would end.

Before the creatures and their human syncopates retired into the dark woods from which they had came, they completely demolished my car. I had tried several times during the nighttime siege to phone for help but the landlines had been cut and my cell phone had no signal. Tomorrow I shall leave a package containing a flash drive with an account of what has transpired here in the mailbox of the handyman who had been the caretaker to this cursed farmhouse all these long years but I have little hope that my message will ever reach you. I will try to enlist the help of the caretaker in getting back to civilization but doubt very much that he will be of any aid. He is in all probability in league with the Outer Ones given that he has been able to live unmolested on their land. In all likelihood he was one of the human riflemen that attacked the farmhouse last night. I close this letter to you with these words. I'm sorry I was not a better father to you and my one regret is that I will never have a chance to make it up to you.

Best,  
your father,  
Justin Akeley

## THE SAMARITAN

*Matthew Wilson*

Hey, listen. You seem like a nice guy. I'm in a bit of trouble; can I ask a favour of you?

Yes, they are nice sunglasses. Aren't they? Well, between you and me I have a slight sinus infection; my eyes are sensitive to the lights in here.

Someone's after me, people. Lots of them. They want to hurt me. No I don't want a drink, thank you. Can we get out of here? Can you stand? Whoa. I got ya, here, put your drink down; I think you've had enough. That's it.

Put your arm around me, do you have a car? Good, can you drive? Here, give me the keys. Yeah - good night, barman. No, it's all right. I'll see him home safe. Watch the steps Mr... that's it. One, two, three. There we go.

You got a name? I'm Alison. Craig? That's nice, you from round here, Craig? Just round the corner? Great. Here, watch yourself, oh shit, there they are. No, I don't know why they're carrying garden forks. You'll still help, right? You'll get me out of here?

Oh thank you, oh, your breath's like battery acid. What have you been drinking? Yes I'm very beautiful. Yes, sex. Sexy sex. We'll do all the sexy sex you want to when we get out of here. Is this your car?

I'll press the lock and - ah, this one - come on. Get in. No, they've seen us. Look out, they're throwing stuff. I'm sorry about your windscreen, I'll get you another one. Rather it hit that then taking off your head, move over. Get down, they're still chasing us!

Which way, which way? If you can't talk, just point. No, don't fall asleep, you bastard! Keep pointing! This way? All right.

I know that was a red light but this is an emergency, here, here's your house? Hold on, I think we're losing them. Whoa, careful, hold on to the dashboard. I'm pulling us over; we gotta get you into bed before you fall down. That's it. Your house is in darkness, is anyone in?

You live alone? Great. I mean it's great for what we got in mind, right? Yes, that's it, sexy sex. Give me your keys. Damn it. If you can't stand up just wait there, ok, I got 'em, no, I didn't mean to touch your thing while I was rooting round your pockets.

Up we go, nice and easy. Come on, I don't want to be seen. Are you sure the neighbours will be in bed by now? Excellent. Here we are. Nice garden. I like what you've done with the roses. Ok. Can I trust you to stand there while I open the door? Honey, I'm home. Ha -ha. All right, watch your - ow. Damn it. No, I'm all right, I just stubbed my toe. No, I don't want to turn the lights on, I can see just fine. Do you have something to eat? I'm starving.

Oh never mind, where's your bedroom? Point. Oh, up there? All right, up we go, count the steps. Nine, ten, eleven. Here we are. I love your wallpaper. Here, sit down while I take your shoes off. No I don't know why those people were after me. I just happened to rub them up the wrong way. What are you doing? No, don't put the light on!

Why are you screaming? Oh, yes. My eyes. Well, you've only got yourself to blame, you know, I told you to leave it alone. Yes, I always thought they looked like rubies. Ow, damn it! Put that lamp down, put it - now look what you made me do. All right, I'm sorry I broke your arm but you weren't being very nice.

Are you sure you haven't got any food? I'm ravenous. Please stop screaming, you're giving me a headache. Stop! Now look what you made me do. Oh well, saves me going downstairs for a midnight snack now, doesn't it?

I can't stop the bleeding but I can make it quick. Here, lie down. That's it. Now I want you to close your eyes, this might hurt – it's all right. It's only a claw.

Good night.

## LITTLE GREEN TARGETS

*Shane Ward*

It was cloudy, quite cool for Colin, but he did not mind. He leaned back on the park bench, put a mug of tea to his mouth and watched the traffic go by. He had been raised in this small town and when he hit adulthood, he escaped to the big city and never looked back. It wasn't the past he was leaving; it was the town's deranged history.

Legend had it that this town was subject to a bizarre form of alien abductions, just like many towns all across America. It seemed these little green men wandered all over the world cherry picking good spots to abduct and experiment. Of course Colin did not believe in such legends, but he remembered the stories vividly.

Across the road and down a hundred yards was the local coffee shop; it drew in residents from all over. It was the local hot spot and Colin often went there when he was young and listened to all the frightened townsfolk relive their experiences while on the alien ship. It was definitely a ploy for the media. Everyone visited this small café and it soon became the hub for the *all you can eat information*. It got so popular the owner renamed his business: *UFO Central*. Such a fitting name. Colin avoided the place after that.

But the stories were all the same: some lonely woman or man would drive along the road leading to town. Their car would break down, lights go out and the sky would glow with a ghostly blue haze. The person would be sucked into some dark room, anchored down, probes inserted into strange orifices and they would be subjected to the usual terrors one would expect to hear in a tale such as this. The story was interesting at first, the specific detail, the terror they felt, but once he had heard the same tale again and again; it became obvious the town's folk were creating a scam to boost tourism.

It took two years for the scam to be uncovered. He read about it in the newspaper his father sent him while he was living in the big city. It appeared the mayor wanted to increase public awareness and business.

Contracting a few locals with the same story to drive up business was a good idea at the time, but it was the story that did not stand up to scrutiny. Even an idiot would be smart enough to create a different story to entertain

the media. The plot was uncovered when several confidential documents made their way onto the media's desk and the mayor was booted out of office so fast he hardly had time to clear his sex dolls out of the closet.

Still, the next mayor to be elected did not improve the place at all and since the scandal, the town's population had dwindled and the place soon became surrounded by gypsies who waited patiently for it to become abandoned. So far the place held true because of the tourism trade still carried on from people who hadn't heard about the scam.

The town had a lot of history and it brought back long obsessive memories. Colin remembered the moment three years ago when he was committed to the psychiatric hospital for his unusual urges. It was only for a few months, but he blamed it on the town and its own obsessive attitude towards the fake alien abductions. The people had lived with the lie for so long that everybody believed the story. The only reason he decided to return to the town was because his younger sister had pleaded for his help. She did not say why, so he arrived as soon as possible.

Colin tossed the remaining contents of his tea on the floor and walked to his car. He switched on the ignition and sighed solemnly before proceeding to the family house.

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Glancing at the semi-detached house that towered over the area, Colin Conroy felt the pressure from his family's past and, although he had been in the town for all of fifteen minutes, he was anxious to get out.

The town might have changed, but the house had not. Its old painted balcony crumbled at the seams and that garden looked like it had not seen a cutting tool for two years. The tired old windows still rattled in the wind and the tall oak tree continued to drop dead leaves all over the roof and garden. Yep, it was a typical day in the life of the house, but Colin could not abandon his sister.

He inched into the front porch and knocked at the door. He expected to see his father in all his glory; instead he was surprised to see his bubbly sister in pigtails and dress.

"Aren't you a little old to dress up like that?" Colin began.

"Nope, you know me. I'm always young at heart."

Colin smiled before he got to the point. “Why have you called me here?”

“Something’s happened to father. He went out to the local, but didn’t come home. I went to the pub and asked, no one’s seen him.”

“He’s probably crashed out on someone’s sofa, drunk. I shouldn’t worry about it. This is hardly important enough to drag me all the way from the city.”

“But something’s happened to him. The local police found his pickup on the outskirts of town. It’s been totally trashed.”

“What? He’s been involved in an accident?” Colin asked. Not so worried about his father, but the poor individual who got hurt by him.

“No, Sergeant Ryscford combed the town’s border and found no trace of an accident. But that’s not the only thing.”

“Go on,” Colin asked, interested.

“When the investigation department analysed the wreck, they discovered the vehicle had been exposed to high levels of radiation. Not only that but the vehicle showed signs of exposure to an unknown energy source that could only come from space. They think father was abducted by aliens.” She stepped out of the house and looked towards the sky.

Colin stepped back, mouth agape in shock. Then again, he quickly caught himself after he processed the sentence. He couldn’t believe that story. How many times can this town pull a stunt like this?

“Not only that, several of the town’s residents have been reported missing.”

“Look,” Colin said, in a stern tone. “They’re probably having a huge sex orgy in a warehouse somewhere. I shouldn’t worry about him.”

Colin walked into the house uninvited. He scanned the room, saw no change in the late eighties look and took in the normal odor, warm and dusty. He gazed back towards his sister. “Nothing’s changed much over the years. Still the same red wallpaper and musty carpet.”

“Life’s been hard for us. This town’s dying and the tourists disturb the settlement. Even the cemetery was vandalised last night.”

Colin walked past the kitchen and up the stairs to his old bedroom now used for storage. Some of his items were in boxes and he grimaced at his old high school books. They hadn’t called him Crazy Colin for nothing. The amount of fights he got into, the girls he dated and went to bed with often landed him in jail more times than he would like to remember.

Colin turned back to his slim elegant sister. “So, what do you want me to do about it?”

“Go and find him. Can’t you find out where father might be hiding? And if aliens have abducted him, can’t you do something about it? You studied alien abductions, watched the films, yes?”

Colin jogged down the stairs and into the kitchen to grab himself a bite to eat. After convincing his sister that his past involvement with little green men was unhealthy and had ruined his life, he munched on a bread roll as memories of his deranged past flashed through his mind. His obsession was the destructive force he had tried to put behind because, in reality, little green men didn’t exist. It was all imagination, like a child crying for attention.

“Look, it’s not like I don’t want to help father. I’ve had a long journey and I need some rest. If that old fart wants to play with some young women, we should let him. Hell, I hope I have the energy when I am that age.”

“You’re disgusting, Colin!” his sister barked. “Fine! If you’re not going to help, then I’ll go out and look for him. Just let me know when he comes home.”

At exactly five, Colin decided he was tired and wanted to sleep for the rest of the day. He had travelled a long way to help his family and he wanted to resolve the problem that left his sister worried. But there was nothing he could do today. As the night slowly crept into the scene, Colin found a bed in the dusty unused guest room and laid down on it. His sister had offered to make him some lunch, but he decided against it.

Because he had not been in the family house for many years, Colin felt like a trespasser and tossed and turned before he finally got some sleep. Even then, his dreams were vivid, scary.

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Colin was strapped to a table in a room that felt like skin and membranes. He glanced around as best he could, feeling foggy-headed and completely vulnerable. Humming vibrations echoed and scurrying whispers bolted from one dark corner to the next.

Unable to move his head, he gazed around the area with his limited mobility. He saw reflections in the centre of the ceiling, as if spectators

were looking down upon him. He couldn't make out their appearance, but it was the incomprehensible noised that became important.

He heard footsteps all around him. Colin felt small hands over his body; he was naked, paralysed on a metal shelf, no probing table! And then, a green face with bulging black eyes...

~~~

Colin opened his eyes from the nightmare and waited for his vision to return to normal. His heart pounded and he wanted to jump out of the bed, he had to, but he couldn't. He couldn't remember what had happened, but his body felt like it had been ripped from his bed and transported to some far off place.

He was busy searching for any point of reference for his vision. Once he found that spot or cluster of objects, he concentrated hard and focused. Slowly the room solidified into a crystal clear image. Horrified, Colin woke up into his very own nightmare.

Exactly as in the dream, he found himself bound to the table, naked and unable to move. Even the simplest of movements were a chore; such as breathing and moving his eyes. The room was silent. No whispers, no clacking and the dark shade above the ceiling appeared empty, void of any spectators.

Colin calmed his nerves and thought hard. Had the aliens abducted him? Were the tales really true? He thought hard and tried to remember if he had been abducted from home. *Surely I should remember something?*

The memory was hard to find at first but it slowly came back to him, just like he walked out of a misty highway at noon.

A light had appeared outside the bedroom window and disturbed him, rousing him from his deep sleep.

Trapped and in a groggy state, Colin sat up in his warm bed and glanced around. Nothing had changed; all his belongings were still in their original position. The light continued to blaze through his window; at first he thought it was a passing vehicle. But the light should have dissipated if that was so, why was it still there?

The only explanation was that someone might be holding a powerful light outside or they were parked in front of his window. With anger boiling, Colin decided to challenge the individual. He reached for his long

pajamas, extended his left leg out of his bed and felt the cold floor beneath his foot.

The temperature in the room felt colder than before, but Colin put that down to him getting out of a warm bed. Then he saw it, the hunched figure of a creature hidden behind the side table. Upon closer inspection, it wasn't crouching. It was about four foot in height. The shady figure remained motionless, like a statue; Colin could only make out its large head and thin body.

What? He asked himself. Who the hell would be stupid enough to break into my house?

Colin's first thought was that a child had sneaked in, but why? Why would a child enter his home and how? The doors and windows were locked and the alarm was still active.

Suddenly the small form stepped into the light. Its glittering green skin, large oval eyes and tiny mouth forced Colin back into his bed in shock and he huddled beside the bed rest, bending it. It had come. An alien from space! All the Internet images he'd seen, they were true, alien invaders existed!

It raised a bony finger towards him and Colin was drowned in light.

Paralysed, he watched helplessly as he was pulled up from his bed and floated effortlessly through his room. Gravity gave his body mass, which wanted to drop to the floor, but he felt the tight strings of a harness pull him into the sky. He saw the ceiling dissolve into liquid and he passed right through as if he was diving through water. A wet sensation mysteriously slithered off when he was pulled through the clear night sky.

The moon dazzled the night sky but it did not match the brightness emanating from the glittering object above him. Pulsating lights and dancing emerald spots moved in a circular fashion inside the disk shaped figure. He felt himself rise further and further into the heart of the ship. He felt the cool wind in his air, the rumbling din of the beam and the pull of gravity beneath his floating form. *Was this a dream? Am I still in bed?*

Unable to pinch himself because he was paralysed, Colin could do nothing but wait for the experience to end. He had read many reports about the invasive and often painful experiments extraterrestrials like to do on their victims. He knew the torment and the years of help they would have to go through to become 'a normal citizen of Earth.' But he had his own experiences to deal with. He had already spent a large amount of time

receiving help for his condition that he called' *his dark passenger*. It was always there, in the dark recesses of his mind. Now, it seemed that his dark passenger would like to come out and play. With nothing to hold it back, Colin feared the man he would become.

Closer, the epicentre of the ship opened, drowning him in an intense beam of light that sent him into the darkness. He rose up into the abyss.

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The darkness remained over him like a blanket of choking death, much like when he was a child and his mother smothered him.

He couldn't move. He felt the hard texture below his back. It was like a table. He sensed a force staring at him from a distance and was unable to resist. The darkness vanished and the room lit up slowly, displaying fleshy walls and cables oozing with green liquid. He saw a bunch of instruments above him, primed, ready to be *used*.

Colin did not like that one bit. During his time in the town, he had heard many stories about people being kidnapped, experimented and in particular, the great detail the aliens would go through to obtain all kind of personal data.

The first common invasive procedure involved probing the eyes, nose, mouth and ears. Sticking needles into the eye was one procedure he feared the most, not to mention the drilling into his skull and whatever they planned to do to his nose.

A face shot into his view. Colin would have jumped off the table if he could. The pent up fear and sheer terror was enough to drive any man insane. But he hung in there. Unable to escape, the only thing the young man could do was scream; if he used all his strength. But that only excited the alien and when Colin could not scream. His left eye had been probed so many times, he could not see out of it properly.

Next was a tool that looked like a vibrator, complete with wiggly maggots at the end. Expecting this instrument to go up his rear-end, he braced himself mentally. But the little green life form stared at him. It craned its head over his face, gazed into Colin's eyes and its small mouth wiggled from time to time. Its large black eyes attracted him like a moth to a flame and its simple nose expanded to let air pass. Its naked form appeared slimy and its skinny legs and arms looked unable to support its

body weight. Then again, Colin was unable to see much. His head was paralysed and he could feel the cold air on his skin. He was naked, he knew that much.

More pain came as a second alien prodded something into his toes. Before Colin could recover, they implanted an object into his belly button and he felt it burrow deep into his guts. With so much pain ripping through his body, the last insertion finally rendered him unconscious.

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When he woke up, his nightmare still continued. He saw the creatures in his dream and now he was back with them again, nowhere to run. *What kind of experiments were they doing? What are they doing to me?*

A scream. A woman's voice erupted from inside the chamber.

Colin was able to move his head. Perhaps the drugs had worn off a little. He saw the barmaid attached to the table, naked, a large impregnated stomach, although he was sure she was thin as a model a few days earlier.

The green horde of unbelievable creatures swarmed over the woman and began to pull between her legs. More instruments fell from the ceiling and Colin watched intently as they attached it to whatever was coming out. The barmaid screamed and wept in agony before she passed out. With a horrible cry, the deformed baby came gushing out like water from a fireman's hose. Thousands of tiny insect-like-worms scattered on the floor and the alien creatures scurried around, collecting, eating the strange afterbirth.

He looked on. One of the creatures stared right back. It moved in his direction, its fat belly rolled and churned behind its thin green skin. Colin felt some level of apprehension down-below; perhaps they would do something to his penis.

He felt slender cold hands on his body. First they ventured along his leg, then up towards his groin and along his chest. The thin green creature came close to his face, Colin was not sure if it was male or female, perhaps he could reason with it.

"W-What are you doing?" he asked. Then he suddenly realized that it might not understand English.

"Do you understand me? Please, don't do this, it hurts us!"

The alien life form did nothing but stare.

“You don’t have to study us like this. You’re an advanced race, just log onto the Internet and check out Wikipedia, it lists all our biology and that of animals too.”

The creature continued to stare and Colin knew he had to start from the beginning. He had to find a baseline for communication, common ground. Then again he suddenly realized something, why would he have to?

“Look, I know you can understand me. Why would an intelligent race such as yourselves build a ship to travel billions of light years and not have the technology to understand our primitive language? I can’t believe you are so vain.”

The creature swayed from side to side and remained silent. Colin glanced over to his left and looked at the woman who had passed out on the table. He wanted to see if she was okay and he wanted to make sure she could not witness his dark passenger. Either way, he wanted to communicate with the extraterrestrial.

“Talk to me, we can learn so much from each other. You need to know who you’re dealing with.”

It stayed still, no contact. Colin felt frustrated. The thought about these creatures storming down from the heavens like god and picking up innocent civilians angered him more. He knew the local law accounted for nothing and the little green aliens could do what they wanted. They had free rein; kill and return to their home world without any punishment. This angered Colin.

“Listen to me, you fuck, answer me!”

Colin’s attempt to get a response finally paid off when it pulled down a long silver object with spikes on the end.

“You’re not shoving that thing up my ass!” Colin warned.

The creature smiled.

Colin smiled right back, just as a voice shouted from behind. “It’s going to kill me, help, help!”

Colin looked behind and noticed that his head was free to move. He wondered why. Why would it allow him to see freely? It might sound odd to the average person, but Colin thought the creature liked him. It didn’t matter; the thought of having no law to follow on the spaceship interested him. He had dreamed of this scenario, albeit not the pain.

Thin slender hands touched his body again and Colin watched the tool wiggle like a drill, hungry for some private part.

What on earth would it do with that? He wondered.

Then, as if the alien was teasing the poor human, it placed the tool back and began touching his body, hunting for the probe, getting a little too personal for Colin's liking.

Colin found it hard to control his feelings. A swarm of arrows shot down to his groin and the hairs on his skin stood to attention. He felt dizzy and excited at the same time. The paralysing drug began to wear down. He was no longer scared or feared for his life. The hot lust well up from deep within, the knowledge that he could do what he wanted and not pay the price. He felt powerful. The adventuring hands stopped moving and Colin moved his head to investigate.

The extraterrestrial stared down at the hard object that was attached to Colin's body and picked it up. Colin groaned with pleasure as an unbidden fire ripped through his body. He then flicked it a devilish look and watched the alien probe his rock hard genitals with long slender fingers, unaware of the trouble it was getting into.

Colin was free and surmised that his freedom was caused by the sudden chemical change in his body. His chest puffed up with unimaginable excitement which was impossible to shake off. There was only one thing left to do. He grabbed the creature's rigid neck with his left hand and easily manoeuvred it. It was the moment he imagined; back against the rock hard table, little green creature leaning over him, his rock hard organ desiring off-limit exploration. He could not wait any longer. He had to tell it.

"I've got a confession to make... back home... I was taken to a psychiatric hospital to be treated for my unusual condition."

The alien struggled, but Colin's overwhelming grip easily held. He continued, safe in the knowledge this alien understood every word.

"You see," he hitched forward, moving his head. "I was taken away because I have these uncontrollable urges. That's why I was taken to the hospital. All those urges were supposed to be erased. But when you kidnapped and began to probe me... the old flame came back."

Colin teased. "You may not be the prettiest extraterrestrial I've seen, but you're my kind of not pretty!"

He shot up from the table. "Assume the position, bitch."

Colin grabbed the alien before it could escape, tossed it around like a rag doll and dragged it on top the table. "You're not going anywhere until I deal with my rock hard emissary!"

Analysing the struggling extritorial with his wide perverted eyes, Colin took his time in admiring the universe's other creation. Never before had he had the freedom to do what he wanted.

There was no law... there were no consequences. He did not care about pregnancy and, to top it all, he could do whatever he wanted. He was not concerned about diseases because chances were that if an intelligent life form found the technology to travel through the stars they would have found a way to purify their body's...

Body!

The mere word sent shivers along his hypersensitive skin. Its body was so alien; he wanted to mount the creature instantly. He scrutinised its rear-end and got even more excited at how alien it was. Round, no cheeks, a pimple of a hole. He wondered how these creatures reproduced. It looked more scrumptious than he'd ever dreamed possible, *sassy!*

"I hope you're female," he whispered to it, dark, sly and menacing in tone.

Suddenly, Colin felt a presence in his mind, an intruder. It was his little friend, trying to knock him out by some kind of mind control. Colin was able to overpower this easily by his sexual urges and he used that link to probe back into its mind. He learned everything he wanted to know about the alien and their reproductive cycle.

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The aliens reproduced like a flower. Their equivalent of a human egg was fertilised inside the creature's body and a separate organ (inside) provided the sperm. Once joined, the egg would develop. They self-reproduced and give birth the normal way humans do. Bodily waste was disposed of through ducts in the skin and they drink a strange incomprehensible substance as nourishment. The tiny hole on their rear-end were used to give birth. Colin knew he could improvise and introduce his own genes into the creature. *It's about time these creatures know how to do it properly!*

Knowing the aliens gave birth created a heavy throb in the pit of his stomach. The extraterrestrial tried to yank itself free but it only added to Colin's lust.

He resettled his grip on the slippery green creature, split its legs and said a few final words before diving in. "Houston, I'm going in!"

He straightened to his full six-foot-plus height, rammed his hips forward and felt the strong opposition of flesh between his legs, resisting his manhood like the fingers on latex gloves.

Burrowing further with more force, he penetrated the slippery surface of the extraterrestrial and suddenly found himself swimming in a pool of warm luxurious silk such as he had never experienced before. Sure, he had many girls back home, but he experienced this with a free mind, no responsibilities and no regret. He could let rip and that's exactly what he did.

Unable to control or hold back, he ravaged the green alien like an animal in heat. He took no prisoners as the moment of ecstasy approached.

"Talk about boldly going where no man has boned before." Colin released a quivering sigh as he held down the struggling alien. He thrust forward with lustful desire.

"You lot are just as bad as humans," Colin said with every stroke. "Kidnapping, performing experiments and then impregnating my friend. If you really wanted to get involved with the human mating cycle, all you had to do was ask. And you were doing it all wrong!" Colin demonstrated as he reached the high of his pleasure and released his powerful juice into the alien. Years of desire, years of lustful need that had built up were finally released in one huge explosion. Colin had never felt this level of self-calmness before.

Back home, Colin could not remove the desire, the need to copulate with a green extraterrestrial. It had always been a deep-rooted fantasy, an incurable condition, until today.

He pulled his hips back and saw green slime all over his manhood, the direct copulation of human and alien. He had broken the veil, the border between interspecies relationships. He should be in some famous book for that.

He left the alien to cower on the floor, satisfied that he had finally got what he always desired and managed to exact revenge for the people these creatures abducted and experimented on. But he was not finished yet.

From the mind connection with his horny green friend, Colin discovered six other creatures ready for his personal lessons. He was not going to disappoint them. As if fate had recharged his weapon, he decided to go on the prowl. But first he had to rescue the prisoners.

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The humans remained motionless, terrified, attached to tubes on the table. He yanked away the pipes and cut off the supply of drugs. Almost immediately, the two prisoners stirred from their paralysed state.

The woman who had been impregnated with that creature awoke with no memory of what happened.

“W-Where am I?”

“We’ve been abducted...” Colin rushed over to the other human. “... Here, I’m going to get you out. Help me with this man.” Colin pulled the tube from the individual and he began to stir, just like the woman.

“What, what the fuck’s going on?” he barked in anger.

“The aliens kidnapped us... Oh my god!” the woman cried.

“Don’t worry about it; I know how to get out. Just follow that corridor to the end and there’s a shuttle. Hit the red sponge button and it’ll take you back to Earth. Hurry!” Colin ordered. He knew exactly what do, his mind invasion worked perfectly.

The tall dark individual, the last to be saved, stared into Colin’s brown eyes. “Are you coming?”

“No, I’ve got a few things I need to do first,” was all Colin wanted to say.

“What are you going to do?” the woman asked inquisitively.

“Don’t worry about me,” Colin said. “He glanced up towards a dark pit in the sky and saw the two other beings observing the entire scene from the safety of their hole.

Colin knew that this ship’s gravity was not as strong as Earth’s. With swift jolt from his legs, he was able to jump all the way to the domed observation room, smash through the glass and bring down the two aliens who would become his next victims.

Colin looked back towards the two humans who gawked in amazement. “Get out of here, I’ll hold them off.”

“But if we leave, how will you get back?”

“Don’t worry about me. I won’t be coming back.”

“What?” the woman said. “What are you going to do?”

Colin grabbed hold of the next creature and spread it out on the transparent table like a joy doll. His manhood was fully awake, ridged and oozing with his last victim’s juices. “I’m going to introduce human DNA

into these creatures and than I'm going to fly this ship over to their home world and fuck every alien there. Now go!"

Colin lowered his body for that perfect alignment and watched the two humans leave the room in complete shock. He said a few words before plunging forward to conquer his next extraterrestrial bitch.

"Here I come. I'm about to bone the forbidden fruit... I am the boner of worlds!"

He dived in and felt the prime flesh of exterritorial life. It would take him half an hour to finish with the two beings and then he would be off to take control of the ship.

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Once Colin saw the small transporter take off and deliver the two humans to Earth, he called it back and began to rummage through the mother ships bio-computer. He was surprised the extraterrestrials only had a crew of six, but he surmised they must be scientists researching life forms on other worlds. He really didn't care. He glanced down at his next target.

He used the buzz in the back of his consciousness to drill into the mind of the green alien with big black eyes cowering beside the flesh mound seat used to steer the ship. He extracted the information he needed and admired the rear-end of this new creature. Drooling at the mouth, Colin did what he had to do quickly.

Armed with the knowledge, he activated the autopilot and sent the mother ship on its way into deep space. He glanced at the destination time to their home world and grinned with sadistic pleasure.

"Just enough time to triple everyone's load." He gazed at his next victim. "Come now, you always violated humans sexually. Why not let me show you how it's done properly? Yeah baby! This is human evolution at its finest!"

## ELEGANT ANGELS

*Ron Koppelberger*

In breaths of red wilderness unflawed the beauty of planet 205.9 was unequaled by anything he had ever seen. The flowers in the dense underbrush were a bright orange and the leaves on the trees were red, there were patches of green here and there. The lush jungle tangle was fascinating but he was entirely distracted by the presence of the angels, the elegant angels.

They were white with tufted feathers and tall nearly eight feet from the bottoms of their pearly feet to the tops of their feathered heads. They were magnificent and deadly. Their teeth were fanged instruments of death at nearly two feet in length, he thought of saber toothed tigers when he saw them. And their eyes were large bulbous balloons with gold irises in the center. They were truly elegant angels and death to those who bothered them. He remembered hearing about the first explorers who had encountered them. They had been drained of all their blood and placed in giant cocoons, as a spider might do or a caterpillar. The thought gave him chills and he tried to imagine something else.

Elegant Angels indeed, deadly and elegant.

## EYES FOR THE FOOL

*Ken L Jones*

*“We are led to believe a lie  
When we see not thro’ the eye.”  
-- William Blake*

“Chandra is dead! There’s nothing there anymore!” Guinn yelled over and over again until his benediction echoed all through the Valley of Peace. Seconds later, in its farthest reaches, blue mists arched up from its floor and formed a pentagram.

Once, not long ago, there had been billions upon this fair world but the recent Dream Wars had decimated the planet, depleting its population until only the brothers Chandra and Guinn remained anywhere on it. Now that Chandra had made the final trek to the Citadel of Forever, Guinn stood alone, the last of his kind. Guinn watched as the blue mist pentagram drifted forward, then engulfed Chandra’s body, which was wrapped in fragrant incense vines, picked it up and took it away in a tornado of rainbow colors. Guinn watched as the multihued vortex faded into the Valley of Peace. When it had at last disappeared from his sight, he slowly made his way back to Bab, once the capital city of the connected modules of the planet Theros.

“A world swallowed up by its own dreams,” Guinn lamented as he passed the temple of Our Lady of the Unending Visions. Tears filled his eyes as he recollect ed how fast his world had plunged over the abyss, its sails full of phantasms never meant to be experienced by the rational mind.

For billions of years, since the first lizard had reared up on its hind legs in the vermillion tide pools of the Sea of Zelth, Theros had prided itself on its rationality and its ability to bring order out of chaos and yet all that had vanished completely with the coming of Juanizalan and his plant of the Billion Eyes. All this sadness had begun on the day that that cursed sorcerer had first appeared on the verdant slopes of the city gardens of Bab. Everyone could tell immediately that there was something different about him because his reptilian body was not naked as was the custom of the whole planet, but was instead clothed in a hooded cloak. He had a glowing

pulsating pouch hanging off his shoulder. To say the least, this stranger's bizarre appearance caused an immediate sensation.

Soon, many of the capital's usually blasé citizens were following in his wake. When Juanizalan arrived at the hydroponic pools at the center of the public gardens he had reached into his pouch and extracted a handful of luminous seedpods which he had thrown into the pools there. Handful had followed handful until he had emptied his pouch of its contents and then, with a flash of putrid gas arising from the bubbling churning waters, strange vine things had started growing. They started sprouting hundreds of thousands of eyes which rotated on slimy stalks. The ever growing crowd had stood transfixed in awe as the sorcerer reached into the pool.

After plucking one of the eye-like things from its stalk, he held it out to the crowd in the palm of his hands as he croaked, "Who will be the first to step into the Garden of Endless Delights? Who will be the first to suckle at the paps of Our Lady of the Unending Visions?"

A young citizen with a glazed look on his face had stepped forward and followed the wizard's admonition to swallow one of the eyeballs on offer. Seconds later the lad sank to his knees in the throes of an ecstasy that bordered on the very shores of madness. All of that had been twenty years ago and that first young fool had been for a time revered as Garol the Divine for having been the first to accept Juanizalan's so-called "boon".

For reasons no one could adequately explain, all the population of the planet had followed suit and then, in a shorter time than you might suspect, everything that Theros once was had gone. Since Guinn had been one of the dissenting few not to try the so-called "Vine of Visions", he had soon become a pariah who was forced to hide out in the desolate floating mesas existing as best he could.

In fact he would have never come back if it had not been for the death voice which called out to his mind when his brother died, as it always did to family members of their race. Guinn had not been anywhere near civilization for nineteen and a half years and he was shocked and dismayed by the fact that not only were all of his former planet brothers now clothed in the style of Juanizalan, but even more horrifying that they were all now long dead. Wandering around the ruins of Bab, Guinn was devastated to see how different it was now from the well-ordered city of wonders that he had once known so well. When he had first turned his back on all this years ago, work and order were starting to break down. What now greeted his eyes

was not the result of natural decay brought on through inactivity but more terribly the fruit of open and brutal barbarism that had come about from psyches that had been split wide open by continuous random and incomprehensible change.

After a long search Guinn had finally found Chandra wrapped in a filthy black cloak. He had taken him, as was the eons old custom, to the Valley of Peace. When he had arrived and undressed his brother he had screamed aloud at what he beheld for Chandra's once magnificent body had been covered from tail to torso with malignant still glaring eyeballs. Still sobbing an hour after discovering this, Guinn built a funeral pyre for his brother and tossed his remains on top of it. For over twenty-four hours it had burned as the nightmarish eyeballs clucked and screeched and protested their approaching demise. While all this was going on Guinn had built a somewhat convincing hollow body for Chandra out of the hard clay beneath his feet and had deposited his brother's ashes within it, for one could not be welcomed into Theron's paradise in anything less than whole form. Guinn had hoped to fool the mysterious forces of the Valley of Peace and fool them he did; this farce was made complete when he wrapped the clay receptacle in the fragrant vines as was the way of their ancestors.

Then, for a time, Guinn was lost in memories. When they had passed he was alone and desolate but charged with a mission. He wound his way through the ruins and the stench of unattended corpses and went to the room where he had nineteen and half years ago toiled for so long. Strangely enough his fellow citizens, in their madness and lust for decay and ruin, had overlooked this more obvious final solution, preferring perhaps the slower pleasures of their drawn out orgy of mayhem and destruction. The lock to the old building was still there even if it was now encrusted with rust and grime. After extracting a key from around his neck, Guinn let himself into the room and quickly pressed a certain button which raised planet wide loudspeakers which now screamed "Theros is dead - there's nothing there anymore!"

In the far off Valley of Peace the blue mist rose, changed to red and then formed a huge reptilian fist with which it began to destroy the planet.

For reasons only it knew it saved Bab for last and Guinn was more than ready for its coming when it did. He stood in the middle of the town square alone and watched with resignation and peace as everything around him was pounded into tiny particles of dust. Sometime during this Guinn

too was granted sweet oblivion, then it marched on towards the Temple of Our Lady of the Unending Visions, now the only structure on the whole planet, now as smooth as glass, that remained intact. It paused for a moment above the hydroponic pools from which still grew the vines of madness then the red fist pounded and destroyed the temple. As it tried to snatch up and destroy the very vines themselves, one half of the eyeballs grafted themselves on to the hand which immediately screamed with pleasure and madness as it headed for deep space where it perished in the twin suns of the galaxy known as Pegasus.

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Ten million years later, Jim Hensley, leader of project Star Grasp, was alerted by his ship's computers that ahead of them in the Pegasus Galaxy was a planet that glowed more brilliantly than any sun. The twenty man crew landed on the shining planet and, after donning specially tinted goggles, they began to explore it. The only thing they found there was a brackish pool from which grew thousands of slimy vines covered in terrifying blinking pulsating eyes. As if obeying an instinct older than time, Commander Hensley reached forward and, with a look of drooling idiotic ecstasy on his face, swallowed one of the offending eyeballs and then fell to the ground, lost in the vacuum of his dreams. Thus was the Church of Our Lady of the Unending Visions reawakened from its long slumber and brought back with these interstellar pioneers to a more than receptive planet Earth.

EVERYTHING IS ALIEN

Neil Leckman

You don't know where you are or where you've been
It just seems like everything is alien
Your eyes burn, the air stinks, your skin crawls
Enough to make you want to climb the walls
Cold chromium tables probing every night
All done by things out of my sight
I must get away from being held
I must get home to my family and meld...

REPLICATION

Dorothy Davies

Observe the soft dying day.

See the rabbit hurrying for the safety of home ere the talons of the bird of prey clamp around its body and rip out its heart.

Be aware of sad lovers languishing in their loneliness and heartbreak. They have hours to kill before sleep relieves them of their burden of unhappiness.

Listen to the harvester in the last field to be shorn, cutting the heads from unwilling crops: their sacrifice feeds you all.

Observe well the fast falling night. For then the killing truly begins – and all that has gone before is as of naught.

And know that we are here to take your essence and use it to replicate

Long have we watched your planet, long have we sought to merge with you, to find out how you think, feel, make your plans and carry them out.

We see your weaknesses, we gauge your attitudes; we wallow in your sorrows. How you find heartbreak in the non-presence of another, how you find pleasure in the killing of another, be it enemy or stranger, or even a once-loved person now lying lifeless in the ground and rotting. For what?

Do you not see the harvester's work as sacrifice? We think not. We see you rejoice in the bringing home of the sheaves of corn as if they were the bodies of the dead. For we see you honour the bodies of the dead in the same way, with dignity, with solemnity, with celebration.

We do not understand you.

How easily you say 'we will not eat meat' but watch the bird of prey as it swoops on its unsuspecting meal and admire it as it does so. Why is it all right for something wild to take life but you will not eat the meat of something slaughtered?

How easily you say 'I love you' but the weapon in your hand tells a different tale to those of us who watch – and believe us, we do.

For countless years we have come and gone from your planet, learning your way of communication which is as different from ours as it is possible to achieve, for we do not use sounds as you do. In that learning we

have come to realize you are strange people with strange ideas, we know well that you often say one thing but mean another entirely. Sometimes the person to whom it is said understands the words and laughs. That we do not understand.

Sometimes the person to whom it is said takes the words for what they are and believes the lie. This we do not understand. Why would you accept a lie? Do you really not see what is behind the words, in that person's heart?

The reason we are here is simple.

We wish to replicate you on our home planet.

We are tired of travelling to find out for ourselves what you are in the way of beings. And so, we are drawing close to you, absorbing your essence into ourselves, making us a copy of you with all that you are – and taking that back to our home planet where we become you in all your variations for others to work on and attempt to understand.

The day we do, we will return.

For you see, we fear you and what you are capable of doing.

Even as you slaughter the corn in the field, so we will return and slaughter you. We will return and end it all, end this world and all that it has in the way of threats for the universes out there.

We will return and then the killing will truly begin – and make all that has gone before be as of naught.

TRANSFORMATION

Marietta Miles

Danny King lifted his head from the pillow. The night was waning and he could hear the wind blowing softly from the mountains. Through the peace and quiet drifted the hazy sound of footsteps. Looking from his second story window, past the tin roof shed and the big red barn, he spied his parents. Patricia and Kiernan King faced the restless night sky and quietly ascended the moonlit hills. Danny's blue ribbon nanny, Debbie, drooped in his mother's arms. The doe was dead; her throat yawned wide, her belly pulled apart and her white coat sullied red. His mother, barefoot and nearly nude, stopped short of the apex. She turned, sniffed the air and opened her mouth, tasting the wind.

Mother's face was a deathly green and her eyes strangely lit; candles in an empty window. Blood and silky fur stuck in patches to her peeling face. Behind her, Kiernan King came to a stop, his muscled back and shoulders twitching like an animal with an itch. Danny's mother again turned her back to their white clapboard house, threw down her kill and disappeared over the hill. His father followed, pitching himself over the horizon. In the valley, beyond the knoll, a glowing light exploded and abruptly darkened. Danny closed his eyes; a chilly sweat spread over his chest, his throat tightened and he pretended to sleep until the morning.

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Danny, brave with first light, stepped over the two pools of thickening blood outside his bedroom door and followed the footprints to his parents' bedroom. Red stains painted the pillows and mattress. His eyes lingered on his mother's tidy vanity, his father's untouched night stand; a photo of Danny in his jersey, his mother on their wedding day. Bewildered and frightened, he walked into one of the antique cherry posters. His stomach overwhelmed young Danny and he felt as though he was dragged down the hall and to the stairs; his bare feet cut open by broken glass from windows and frames. The bloody tracks of his mother and father continued out the front door and into the weak yellow morning. Danny followed, his

trembling fingers touched the cracking paint of the wooden porch, the rough bristle of the boxwood bush and yet he was positive this was a bad dream.

Startling silence swept over the misty valley. He did not hear the symphony of mowers; typical for Saturday mornings. He did not hear the honking of horns or the rumble of cars and trucks. There was only the breeze and the birds. Following the small oak covered lane, Danny wandered into town, afraid to be alone.

Just inside Fort Royal one small girl, shaking and dazed, stood in front of the Laundromat. Knotted and matted hair covered her face, her mouth was open but making no sound and her eyes were large with fear. Farther down the boulevard, children crashed into or scrambled around each other; calling out for their mothers, begging for their fathers. Some sobbed and some screamed. A baby wailed in his sister's chubby arms. A little boy in faded blue pajamas ambled up to several older girls, desperate to feel their arms. Time after time he was pushed away, the girls too worried to care. And though the children cried with all their might, no one came to save them.

The tall railroad stores of the main street closed around the children like a tunnel. The mountains leaned close and storm clouds approached. Danny and the older boys found shelter in the alleyways and stood watch over the entrances. The girls grouped the kids by age. Safe in each other's arms and guarded by a few, the children fell asleep while night gathered. The second baseman for Danny's summer baseball league sat across from him on the pavement.

"I heard what happened, Danny," the boy whispered of the night before. "I didn't hear what got em' but I heard Mom and Dad." He looked at the ground between his knees. "She said my name," he said. "And I never thought I would hear my dad scream... but," he paused. "It sounded like they were being pulled apart." A tear dripped down his nose. He said he watched as his parents walked towards the hill behind Danny's house. They were black with blood.

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Only Danny King was brave enough to peer over the summit and then only three times. Three days after the disappearances, with the children in town and growing either frantic or useless, Danny spied on the blackened valley

behind his house. He looked for more than twenty minutes. While he cried he counted eighty six burrows; one for each grown person of Front Royal.

Two weeks after the event Danny again checked the valley. The eighty six holes that once appeared like empty graves had grown into small mounds. A thin wet film covered the hollows and gritty dirt stuck to the outside. What seemed to be roots or stumps, though sickly, broke from the dirt and a black moss grew over the lot.

Now Danny thought about yesterday afternoon; his final trip to the valley. He had seen shadowy tentacles launch from the red, red sky. He watched limbs push through the membrane covered bodies of his parents, his teachers; everyone. The pits grew swollen; like filling leeches, engorged and finally discharging. Danny saw the grown-ups crawl from their earth beds, skeletal hands rising to block the sun. They wiped the dirt from their bodies. He glimpsed the rusty red hair of his fair skinned mother. Slowly she looked to the sky with eyes that were not her own, eyes that were angry, hungry. Her mouth was not a smile but a dry crack in a blackened, burning log.

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“I’m taking this,” Danny said to his pals as they loaded their weathered backpacks. He gripped the heavy aluminum bat; remembering how his father would hit and Danny would field on warm evenings while his mother finished dinner. He turned the bat over and over in his hand. “It should do just fine.” The boys stood together, a few older girls in their midst checking on their random supplies.

“We’re just looking, right?” A tall boy in the back, near the wall, spoke out nervously. The door to the Laundromat, the hub of their new world, was open; allowing sun to sweep across the young rangers. The boy who spoke looked from Danny to the door, a rat about to run.

“Sure, just looking. Then we’ll come right back. I promise,” Danny nodded his head. He smiled absently and headed for the door. He had seen rotting figures rise from the valley, and was sure the time for looking had passed. Outside, he heard the approaching commotion and could smell the rot. He knew what was rising over the hill; knew that their folks were coming home.

## ALDEBARAN OPHIOLATRY

### *Dave Fragments*

Shortly after 9am, Captain Tarreck marched his naked squad through security checks and guarded doors into an elaborately shielded and ultra-secret laboratory. The facility was hidden in the western desert next to the mountains. At the far end of the room was a cylindrical device that looked like three tanning beds fitted together. It had energy pumps, field generators and a control panel. To its left stood a glass-walled Mediterranean-style herpetarium large enough to hold several snakes. He thought that odder than the scientific device.

“I was told this was astronaut training,” he said.

“This don’t hardly look like that,” Beau Tavi said.

“More like a tanning salon for French whores run by pimp-nerds,” Carlos the navigator said. Flight engineer Ricky Carr joined him.

“Looks ominous, alien even,” Captain Tarreck said half to himself, half to his men. Beau, his first mate, joined Ricky in poking at the apparatus. The door behind them pushed open and two lab technicians entered. The lead lab technician, whose nametag read Jonas, had a stack of towels and less important horn-rim glasses, a pocket protector with clutch pencils, a shaggy head of ginger hair and sandals with socks. The soldiers grabbed the towels and wrapped them around their waists, relieved to be no longer completely naked.

“Don’t touch anything. If you break it Professor Deporabati will have my ass,” Jonas said. The four soldiers proceeded to touch everything in the room. The other lab tech, whose nametag said DERP in magic marker scrawl, stepped between the control panel and a soldier just in time to grab an expensive blown-glass distillation column as it rolled off the counter.

“I’m so thrilled at hearing that! Deporabati made us parade naked around half the facility,” Captain Tarreck said as he opened a drawer to be annoying. Beau, the tallest soldier, pretended to stumble into a shoji screen and pretended to catch it as it fell. He thought it would be funny to land with a loud oomph but something hidden knocked his feet from under his flailing body. He ended up sitting on his butt holding the broken screen with a giant snake man slithering around his legs. He stared, amazed, at the creature.

“You couldn’t resist, could you?” the snake-man hollered. A forked tongue slid out of its mouth, past its non-existent nose and flicked across Beau’s face.

“You licked me!” Beau yelled.

Ignoring the outburst, the snake-man coiled his length under him and stood tall. It looked like a genie on a cloud of smoke with its muscular arms folded over his broad chest. Beau was face-to-gut with the snake-man’s abdomen. It was covered with golden-green scales and the snaky head launched into a diatribe aimed at Beau.

“Do you finger wet paint just to be sure it’s wet? If a sign says ‘don’t walk’ to you walk anyway? Do you live up to your name, Tavi, or are you nothing more than a pile of tiger droppings waiting for someone to step in?”

“I’m sorry, Nagesh,” Jonas said. The snake-man slithered off Beau.

“What the hell are you?” Beau extended a finger to touch the snake’s body. It hissed, baring large fangs.

“You clumsy oaf! We haven’t been properly introduced,” the creature said, swatting away Beau’s hand. His face registered first surprise and then determination.

“I’m Beauregard Montgomery Tavi of the New Orleans Tavi’s. I grew up in the Honey Island Swamp. I’ve caught and eaten some really humongous swamp snakes with my granddaddy when I was a kid. We called it the dance. You want to dance? I dance real good,” Beau said. He grappled with the snake and brought it down in a bear hug. They wrestled each other across the floor and thrashed the cabinets before the snake’s stern expression disappeared. He tied Beau into knots but each time Beau broke away. They were equally strong and in the confines of the lab, neither could gain advantage. Their wrestling continued until each of their heads thumped the hard floor several times. Laughing, Nagesh slithered around Beau’s body, touching him with his tongue.

“It’s a truce. Well I won’t sauté you if you won’t sauté me. The name is Nagesh.” He gave Beau a man-hug and pulled them both to their feet in an impressive show of strength. They leaned on each other.

“You’re a real alien from another-” Captain Tarreck didn’t finish. Nagesh interrupted.

“Obviously. We called it Arcadia and it circles Aldebaran. My spaceship crashed in Guatemala. It might be Eden but in every Eden there’s

temptation. Jonas rescued me. Helped me repair the ship. I offered to fly him to my planet if he found me a crew.”

“But you can’t take off because you need a crew. Is that so?” Captain Tarreck asked, again stating the obvious.

“I was told you volunteered.” Nagesh’s expression hardened to anger and his body reddened. He didn’t seem pleased with the Captain’s answer.

“We volunteered to be astronauts and were told to march around the facility naked,” Carlos said. Ricky grunted an affirmation.

“To be honest, Deporabati gets his jollies watching swinging tools. Nagesh insisted that you be informed before you volunteered,” Jonas said.

“We weren’t informed.”

“Looks like we’ll be the first Homo snake-ians launched into space,” Carlos snarked. Jonas rolled his eyes at the ceiling.

“We thought Ophidian was an appropriate term for humans in space,” he said.

“Something special about snakes?” Captain Tarreck asked. “That thing that looks like a tanning bed is going to change our bodies.”

“Aye. A Guatemalan crawled into the ship and activated the drive while I was helping Nagesh. It blinked in and out of existence twice and shit him on the ground like a dog dropping a load-brown, shriveled, a stinking pile of what once was human,” Jonas said. Nagesh shook his head affirmatively.

“My race discovered a spaceship with the FTL Stardrive drifting through our solar system. Its path led a thousand light-years to another sun. The scientists never did determine why or how it worked. No one knows why snakes survive. They theorize it uses alternate dimensions. Professor Deporabati should have explained that before we met or you saw the machine. Damn him. That was our agreement,” Nagesh said, softly, thoughtfully. He didn’t sound pleased.

“So all of your astronauts transformed into snake-like creatures?” Captain Tarreck asked. Nagesh got very still.

“No, all of Arcadia transformed. That was four thousand years ago. We weren’t ready for the changes. It forced us to abandon our planet to the lower creatures. One day our world will be a new Eden to a new race, no longer ours.” Transformation changed from new and adventuresome to serious and unexplained. Spaceflight became frightening.

"Deporabati didn't inform us of anything more than this was our only chance and that once in space, we'd be clandestine. I think my men might be more comfortable with this if we had a chance to inspect your body. Seeing as it's going to be our bodies in a little while."

Nagesh didn't object and held his arms out. His torso-buttocks, hips, abdomen, arms, neck, back and chest-appeared human but his ribs continued down his torso to where his legs should be. His lower body was a round mass of muscle that ended in a tail. They measured his length at eighteen feet. His well-muscled abdominal section revealed a sizable male bulge near the base. They didn't ask Nagesh to open his privates, assuming that he was male like them. Nagesh took the opportunity to taste and sniff their bodies with his forked tongue.

Without warning, armed guards burst through the door of the laboratory. Professor Deporabati walked behind them carrying a tray with ampules of green fluid and four hypodermic syringes.

"Ah, I see that you've introduced yourselves and are getting to know each other. I highly encourage it. I selected all of you for your physical prowess, inquisitiveness, and adaptability. I want to be the first to greet the new crew of earth's newest spaceship." Professor Deporabati ignored attempts by the soldiers and lab technicians to engage in conversation. "Shall we get started? I have the refined adulterant for your DNA. Would you please form a line and give me your arms?"

He handed the tray to Jonas and pointed to Captain Johnson's arm. Then he snapped his fingers at the other lab tech and pointed to Beau. Beau began to ask a question, but Professor Deporabati dismissed him peremptorily. Each prospective astronaut received four injections, one in each thigh and bicep.

"You know what the doctor always says, don't you? Wait fifteen minutes for full effect before using the device. Now, I'm going to dinner and then I'm going home. Don't bother me until tomorrow when I will examine your new bodies and certify your space-worthiness. Tomorrow, Nagesh will reveal his spaceship. That is the deal, isn't it, MISTER Nagesh? We would have given you a crew earlier if you had only revealed your spaceship." Professor Deporabati stood with his hands on his hips as if he might get an answer. Nagesh rose up on his tail and fixed his snaky yellow eyes on Deporabati. The yellow eyes never blinked as he maintained the dominant position. Deporabati lost the staring battle. He had to blink

and breathe. The snake didn't. Thwarted, Deporabati snapped his fingers in Jonas's face.

"You look scruffy Jonas. There will be a letter in your permanent file for disrespecting the lab tomorrow." He left a dozen fully armed MPs to guard the perimeter of the building. Jonas shook his head back and forth.

"Officious little git," Captain Tarreck said.

"About as friendly as a turd in a punch bowl at a fancy dress cotillion," Beau added.

"He's a derp." The nameless lab tech shrugged.

"He's a petty tyrant who lies and backstabs and badmouths and goose-steps his around the base like he owns the lab. Those soldiers obey only him. They're his enforcers."

"You two know where the spaceship is. You're hiding it from him," Captain Tarreck said. Nagesh and Jonas looked up at the ceiling.

"Is it buried right here in the desert?"

"We're lost." The other lab tech threw his hands up and turned away. Jonas grabbed him and pulled his head close to whisper.

"This is the only way, dude. We can't let Deporabati disseminate the secrets of the FTL stardrive."

"Then stick to the plan. Quit freelancing it," the other lab tech answered.

"What the hell you two doing? This ain't playing World of War with your joystick or making whoopee in bed. This is life and death for us," Captain Tarreck grumbled.

"Look, I might have a bad case of ophiolatry. I might even be a serial ophiolater. But, I keep my joystick in my pants and I resent your implication. I've been in locker rooms since age six. My father played professional football and when my mother died, he took me to every camp, practice session and game. I grew up with nothing but big hulking linebackers and defensemen parading naked all around. I know more about internal medicine and men's muscles than Deporabati ever dreamed. He's an ass-kissing weasel bent on finding that spaceship."

"I see. The spaceship isn't here but Jonas the Obscure is," Beau said, elbowing the Captain. Jonas removed his lab coat and pulled his T-shirt up over his head with one hand. He stretched, revealing arms and chest of chiseled muscles. He braced and let Nagesh coil around his body.

“Do it.” Jonas said as he rubbed his nose against Nagesh’s snake-like face and braced. The snake-man sank its fangs deep into Jonas’s neck. He staggered, his knees buckling. His face showed the pain but he didn’t make a noise. The snake-man wrapped around him, kept him standing. When they broke, two thin lines of blood trickled down Jonas’s neck and over his chest. The four would-be astronauts stared.

“That looks like it hurt,” Beau said. “What was it? The Alien godfather’s kiss of death?” His voice grew hoarse, breathy and gruff. “Like Fredo when Michael says: ‘You broke my heart, Fredo!’ When you see our Deporabati, I want to know a day in advance so I can summon the goons.” Groans filled the air like fugitive emissions. Nagesh turned his snaky head toward Beau and stared at him. His tongue flicked in and out, searching for an answer. He tasted disdain and fear in the air. He might not have understood the cultural reference but the daggers from his yellow slanted eyes were aimed at Beau and Beau knew it.

“I thought it was funny,” Beau said, sticking his tongue out and wiggling it at Nagesh.

“Venom is the normal way to prepare a subject for transformation,” Nagesh answered.

“He doesn’t produce enough venom for a crew. Deporabati force him to be milked to get enough of the transformative,” Jonas over-explained, cleaning the blood from his neck and chest.

“You can still join us,” Nagesh said to the nameless lab tech.

“No can do,” was the answer.

“Don’t worry. He’ll do good by us.” Jonas took his wallet and keys from his pants and handed them to the other lab tech. “You know where I left everything. My computer has all the accounts and my strong box has a completely new identity. Get away from this godforsaken hell-hole and start a new life.”

The nameless lab tech left the laboratory.

“We seem to be pawns in a broad river of discontent and rebellion,” Captain Tarreck said. Nagesh slithered over next to him and activated the machine so fast that no one had the chance to ask about their secrets. Lights blinked and machines vented something.

“Time to get this baby off the ground, to use one of your more bizarre, human clichés. Who’s first?” Nagesh said, opening the lid of the machine.

"I know what's going to happen. They don't," Jonas said. He climbed onto the bed of the device and pulled the lid closed. The outline of his body was visible through the translucent lid. Lights flashed, energy fields glowed as streamers of plasma filled the device. Jonas's bones became flexible and the venom began to alter his DNA radically. The transformation took forty-five minutes to complete.

When Nagesh opened the lid, Jonas lay moaning, scaly hands curled around his reshaped head. His new scale-covered torso was four times its human length and ended with a tail below a masculine bulge and rearranged buttocks. Grayish-blue and gold scales covered his human pecs, deltoids and trapezius. He retained the five fingers on his hands and his arms were longer, heavily muscled. His face was flat and smooth against an earless head. His eyes were yellow with slit-like pupils. Two breathing holes replaced his nose. Nagesh took Jonas's hand and helped him sit up. The new snake-man wobbled.

"Damn! You said that wouldn't hurt but it hurt like hell." His new voice hissed softly.

"So I lied a little bit. Crawl around the laboratory to let your mind and body get to know its new parts. That's the best way to forget the pain," Nagesh said. He pushed Jonas off the machine. The astronauts winced as he smacked the floor and flopped totally awkward and stupid-like while trying. He resembled an idiotic, aimless worm wiggling away from a hook for several minutes. Jonas cursed as he relearned how to crawl on his stomach. Carlos and Ricky helped him squirm into an open area.

"Your scales are soft." Carlos carried Jonas's chest and abs.

"And you're still a man." Ricky gave Jonas's bulge a good squeeze. Annoyed, Jonas curled into a sitting position without thinking and landed a punch in Ricky's face. He lost balance from inertia and fell over onto both hands. He did pushups with his fifteen foot-long body slithering back and forth behind him.

"This is getting to be so weird!"

One by one, the would-be astronauts sealed themselves inside the cylinder and let the machine transform their human bodies. Five new snake-men slithered around the laboratory, learning how to move. Nagesh explained the unfamiliar parts of their new bodies; the eye flaps to shield their eyes, the way their arms could fold into the sleekness of their bodies for passage through sand, the enhanced senses of smell and taste based on

their forked tongues and the hunting aspects of eating as sport with a dozen white mice. By the end of the day, they understood the newness of their bodies; each moving naturally and each functioning like snakes.

However, in every Eden there is a snake in the grass-a cobra that seeks to kill with venomous bite and a mongoose protecting its young ward.

Shortly before midnight, Nagesh woke his new crew and went to the back of the building. An explosion shook the walls and sirens blared. They could hear running and yelling. Nagesh pointed to a hole in the floor. It was a tunnel. They slithered through into the sewers under the building. Above them, the nameless lab tech waited in a panel truck over the opening of a sewer grate that hid the tunnel. Jonas poked his snaky head out of the sewer and looked at a slice of the world with new eyes. The colors were different and the night less dark. In the distance, he could see the heat of the guards' hands and faces as they handled equipment.

"You never told me you could see body heat," Jonas said to Nagesh. Whispers repeating his discovery echoed in the sewer along with complaints about the cleanliness of the disgusting slime and moans about touching each other in the tight spaces. The whispers turned louder when Nagesh, who was bringing up the rear, chased a mischief of rats over his crew, encouraging them to feed.

"Shut up down there and get in this damn truck," the nameless lab tech said down the hole in the floor of the truck. He yanked Jonas through and pushed him to one side. The cargo area of the panel truck was small but adequate for six large snakes.

"If the guards stop the truck don't move, don't talk, don't hiss, or slither, or whatever you think you might get away doing. Get comfortable with each other now. If the guards look in the back of the truck, I want them to see nothing but tarp. They find you, they'll shoot me first." He threw a tarp over the snakes and drove a circuitous path from the building through the base to the main gate. Their destination was the mountains. They planned that Deporabati would not discover their absence until morning.

Thirty miles to the east of the laboratory, a series of caves hid Nagesh's spaceship. When Jonas rescued Nagesh in the Guatemalan rainforest he didn't seek out the authorities immediately. Nagesh required a crew. Jonas knew that the only device Nagesh could offer that would justify the sacrifice of five humans was the spaceship itself. It had to be kept secret. Jonas returned to the site of the crash with enough electronics to

partially repair the control systems of the spaceship. They made a plan to escape the authorities and permanent imprisonment discovery entailed. Nagesh brought the craft to this cave where they dismantled the spare transformation device and moved it to a location near the laboratory. Within the hour, they would leave the earth with their secrets intact. Their plan would succeed.

Even hidden in the blackness of a cavern, the spaceship looked completely alien - neither round, nor cigar-shaped, nor cubic, but radically tubular like the curl of a wave, snaky and serpentine. Its width and height filled the cavern. The only orientation related to human architecture and structure was up and down because of the six very obvious struts it rested upon.

“Your new eyes will see the control surfaces and the ship will respond to a limited array of non-verbal commands,” Nagesh said as his glance opened a round door barely two feet in diameter to the interior. Jonas, Captain Tarreck, Beau, Carlos, and Ricky slithered inside. The lab tech waited in the cave until Nagesh came out to thank him. The lab tech shook hands with Nagesh.

“Jonas and the crew are learning their new tasks.”

“Wait until they discover that you’re a race of hermaphroditic egg layers,”

“They’ll adjust to that too. I can still take you along. All I need do is focus the main transformation beam on you.”

“I want to but my wife, we, her and me, well, we just had twin boys. I can’t bear to leave them. Deporabati would certainly hassle them and I don’t want the possibility that he ruins their lives to haunt me. This is the best decision.”

“Maybe in twenty of your years, I’ll return and see if you or your sons want to travel into space. Now, go far away. Be elsewhere when we launch and never work for the government again.” Nagesh shut the hatch. The lab tech hurried away on foot, leaving the truck to be destroyed in the cave. He walked a swift five miles to a waiting car and drove it to his house. Changing cars once again, he headed south with his wife and two children.

About that time, the walls of the cave lost structure as the FTL stardrive activated. Half the mountain dissolved. The spacecraft floated like a tiny transparent sun across the landscape to the laboratory. It stopped above the laboratory where the transformation device sat idle. A lightning-

like bolt of energy destroyed the building and its contents. The FTL stardrive folded space and time and they left the vicinity of earth. The nameless lab tech and his wife didn't look back at the light that ripped open the desert sky. They knew that its next stop was a space station circling a green planet in the Aldebaran system.

"Twenty years is a nice round number, don't you think?" the lab tech asked his wife as they crossed the border.

## BOWIE AND THE STAR PIRATES

*Ken L. Jones*

Piety Farmer stood in the middle of Market Square watching the sun come up. Soon it would be All Points Day, the only time in the whole year when traders from every world would come for the annual barter. Rachael Farmer brought her father a draught of fresh buttermilk in an earthen mug. As they looked up into the cloudless dawn sky an unfamiliar shape slowly began to take form. From a distance it looked like a giant spider web and as it came closer the Farmers saw that it indeed seemed to be just that but was manmade. As they looked closer at it they realized that it was a huge flying craft. Its glowing metallic strands were solar energy collectors and it hovered above the earth at a ninety degree angle. Because of their close proximity, Rachael and her father saw what looked like a giant spider in the center of the web. Then, without warning, the spider began to move on clicking metallic legs. When it got to the edge of the web a large glowing cable lowered the cabin of the spaceship to the ground, arachnid style. When the pod had touched down, its pilot jumped out of the top of his machine. His appearance caused Rachael Farmer to gasp. He wore a tattered filthy armless leather jumpsuit and unpolished boots. Bandoliers of ammunition crisscrossed his chest and weapons, which were variants of knives and guns, were sheathed in various parts of his tunic. His breathing apparatus, which jutted out menacingly, was truly frightening; it looked like a skull and crossbones ripped from some pirate's flag. Goggles enclosed the eye sockets and primitive looking air hoses sprouted from the nose and mouth apertures. Long unkempt hair hung way down the back of it. Unearthly glowing tattoos, which covered every visible inch of skin, completed his frightening visage. He ripped the mask off of his head in one fluid motion and tossed it in the direction of his vehicle. His face was filthy but handsome. His grin showed even teeth decayed and stained from too much tobacco and white sugar. His long beard was sweaty and contained the fragments of a recent meal.

"Hello, Elder, I'm Bowie Burroughs, trafficker and trader. Got cargo full of value in my ship. That's her over there, The Silver Spider. She's run around 'tween here and Pluto and I managed to accumulate enough swag to come back ta home world because I come a-asking for a woman."

Piety Farmer extended a hand as if to tell the star flyer to back off. “Ye will find no woman in Matherville that would be suitable for such as ye, but ye may trade for woman flesh down the road at the house of ill-fame there...”

Bowie Burroughs paid no attention to what Piety was saying. He was instead glancing over his shoulder at the very comely Rachael.

Rachael was returning his looks furtively and something about the shy way she did it aroused the star pilot greatly.

“Are ye listening to me, young man?” said Piety sternly. “What do ye have to barter for any kind of a woman anyway?”

“Well I’m not looking for a whore or anything like that; as of yet I’m childless. I seek a good wife to bear me sons.”

“What for? So they can live in some machine and bounce around the stars where man was never meant to go?”

“I’ve had enough of all that. I want to settle on the Earth with a pure blooded wife such as your daughter.”

“My daughter is promised to Forthwright Plowhard who owns one hundred acres of prime valley. What have ye beyond your devil machine to offer?”

“I have swag that would make you proud to have me as your son-in-law.”

“Such as,” said Piety arching his eyebrow shrewdly.

“Something from the planet Altraxa, such as could make you the most prosperous farmer in the countryside. Are you interested?”

Clearly Piety was but he didn’t show it, for he was a shrewd Yankee trader. “Bring it forth, lad, let’s have a look see,” said Piety.

Bowie pressed a jeweled stud on his belt buckle and something strange materialized in his hand. It was a crystal shaped to look like an alien skull. Rachael and Piety could not avert their eyes from it when Bowie held it over his head.

“Behold the Crystamylian Gem. Sunlight focused through its facets causes a seed to turn into a mature consumable plant in mere minutes,” Bowie said, smiling.

“I can’t believe such a thing is even possible,’ said Piety.

“Then look and see for yourself,” exclaimed Bowie. He produced a corn seed from his pocket, jammed it into the ground and then trained the flow of light from the uncanny alien jewel on it. Within minutes its whole

cycle of growth flashed by the astonished eyes of Piety and Rachael who stood in stunned amazement until Bowie reached out and cracked off an ear of corn and handed it to the old man.

The old patriarch shucked it and then chewed off and gulped down a great mouthful of it. After he swallowed it he broke out in a yelp of pleasure and began slapping Bowie on the back.

“So does this mean that I might have Rachael, if this is my dowry?” asked Bowie boldly.

“I have something to say about all this.” Rachael exclaimed, “For I’m already promised to Forthwright Plowhard, the handsomest and richest of our local men.”

“We never promised anybody anything in writing, now did we, lass?” stammered Piety.

“Does that mean I have your consent, Mein Herr Farmer?”

“Well, ye lend me the jewel and ye may come a’courting my Rachael,” said Piety trying hard to hide his excitement at this turn of events.

The next several days were odd indeed as the Farmer’s parlor played host to two very different swains. Forthwright Plowhard was a model Earther, stocky, strong and no nonsense. He sparked Rachael with conversations that alternated between the good book and the latest crop news. Bowie’s approach was very different. He was now cleaned up, shaven and wearing conservative attire when he came calling with tales of other planets and of peoples far beyond the horizons of Earth. Old Piety Farmer meanwhile lay in several acres’ worth of crop with the aid of the unique gem he was borrowing. Poor Rachael, meanwhile, vacillated constantly between her two suitors one day favoring one and then the next day the other.

This might have gone on unabated had it not been for the events of a quiet July morn during this time. At dawn starships appeared from the East and began to rain destruction on the village. The Earthers, having no defense and no spaceships, were helpless and just when it looked like the worst was about to happen, out of nowhere the Silver Spider appeared in the sky. It played dodge and weave with the peculiar boomerang shaped alien star craft and preceded to blow them out of the sky during this dogfight that became the stuff of legends. The Silver Spider took several crippling hits and at the end of its victory flight it crash landed. Piety Rachael and all the good people of Matherville rushed to the site and pulled the unconscious

Bowie from its wreckage. During his protracted convalescence, Rachael fell head over heels in love with her patient, resulting in her becoming pregnant and then married days later after that.

Bowie and Rachael Burroughs had twenty children and fifty grandchildren who loved to play in the ruins of The Silver Spider as it hung lifelessly from the rafters in their barn. Bowie never revealed that the aliens who helped him inadvertently become a content country squire and the most prosperous farmer on the Earth were actually lawmen who were attempting to recover the skull shaped gem that he had stolen from their planet. As the story evolved over the years he successfully painted those beings and their righteous quest as the acts of the lowest of star pirates and since it was rumored that a massive famine had exterminated all life on their planet, no one was left to question this very jaundiced version of the truth which eventually was taken as gospel by the people of Earth through its massive retelling.

## THE OUTERS

*Anna Harris*

Pumpkin Joe loosened the chin strap on his handmade foil helmet and poked an envelope through the thin space underneath his front door. The ritual offering contained cash for the goods he expected would soon be here and a torn off piece of notepaper listing his soft drink requirements, food and household products for the following week. When he was certain he'd pushed it fully outside, Joe stuffed the rolled brown towel back into place across the base of the door and took up position by the window.

Desolate, pancake-flat terrain allowed him to see for a considerable distance in all directions. Through one of the moth-eaten holes in the faded red curtains Joe watched and waited for telltale signs of the Hagerman *Valley Grocery* delivery vehicle along the approach road. The rundown house didn't see a lot of passing traffic but even from here, a relatively short distance off the main route, noise from the highway hardly impacted on the grim emptiness.

The isolated property, stuck in no man's land under the vast New Mexico sky, was a hot and thirsty walk to any place significant. Well, that's if you considered the nearest town of Hagerman significant. Most folk didn't.

Joe had no personal knowledge of the scenery in either direction though, because in all his sixty-something years he'd never once stepped a foot beyond the yard's edge. He did know Artesia lay to the south and if a person followed the north route far enough they'd wind up on the outskirts of Roswell. Now that Hank's weekly grocery run brought necessities literally to his dilapidated wooden doorstep, he'd no reason to leave the familiarity of the home in which he'd been born and raised, to go off investigating.

In the distance a pale dusty haze washed up and into the wide empty turquoise skyline. Hank.

Thursdays always played out in the same way, with Joe peering through his hole in the curtain until he could see Hank's van pull up out front in the late afternoon. Having deposited the bags, a brief exchange of acknowledgement took place through the door and that would be it until his next drop-off.

As much as he might try, Hank hadn't once persuaded Joe to show his face. He and a small handful of others from Hagerman were concerned that with nobody looking out for him, the ageing man's agoraphobia might one day be his eventual undoing but no matter how he cajoled, Joe would not be budged. Today was no different.

"Y'all right in there, Pumpkin?"

"Uh-huh."

Hank absentmindedly tugged at his earlobe as he took in the deteriorating façade of the house and the neglected yard. Tall dry grass sprouted up through a long since idle rusty harvester rake and various other forgotten farm implements. The faded, brittle safety cones surrounding the perimeter remained a mystery but provided an amusing talking point amongst locals.

"If there's anything you ever need doing around the place you only have to ask, you do know that, don't you, Pumpkin? I mean this decking of yours, for example; it could do with some fixing. I could have it replaced for you if you weren't too sure how to go about it yourself. Someone could take a fall right through these rotting verandah boards," he warned.

'Someone', Joe thought, would have to take their chances because he neither appreciated nor welcomed strangers on this side of his front gate.

Hank waited several silent beats for an answer he knew wouldn't come. "Well," the man said, clicking his tongue, "I'll guess I'll be seein' you next week then."

After the delivery man departed again in a flurry of dust, Joe waited for long minutes. It would not do to be too eager. At this very moment the Outers could have their eyes trained on his weather-beaten door, watching, waiting for just the right moment. Exactly where they were hiding he couldn't be sure because there was nothing out there for miles but dirt and tumbleweed save for a few straggly trees and bushes on the other side of the road but, from as far back as he could remember, his mother instilled in him the fact that those devious Outers would look for any old opportunity to get inside their home and worse, their heads. The Outers were coming for them.

*Never leave the house. Never talk to strangers.*

He couldn't afford to become complacent for a single minute and, because he had never quite worked out *how* they could approach the house without being seen—his mama never elaborated—he took it to mean the

Outers were not only well versed in sly tactics but quite probably adept at invisibility, too.

His mother had lots of rules for them that had to be followed if they were to stay safe: No mirrors, television, radio or other plug-in equipment —candlelight only. Outers could pick up on electrical signals and reflections. That's why the curtains always had to be kept closed across the windows, too. Oh, and talking. She was real big on not talking to people.

*Never leave the house. Never talk to strangers.*

“Socialising is a sure-fire way to let them get a foot in the door,” she repeatedly warned. “Oh, the things I could tell you...”

‘Only she never did. The closest she came to giving Joe specifics was, “Outers are an evil, underhanded lot so it don’t do to be fraternizin’ with strangers we know nothin’ about, y’hear me, son?” which didn’t give him a real lot to go on. “Answer me, boy. Don’t sit there like a big ole lump thinkin’ I can read your mind, because I can’t.”

“Yes Ma’am, I hear you.”

“Yes Ma’am indeedy; we must stick together, you and I. It’s just us against the whole big evil world, Punkin.”

Occasionally he got to thinking he might have missed out on some great adventure by not attending school with other children his age from the district. But his mother was his best friend and protector, so being confined to the limitations of the property wasn’t so bad. She said all the learning a person needed could be found right there in the Good Book and that they were both better off not mingling with the ignorant devil worshippers that sprouted up from the gutters of suburbia.

And hadn’t the two of them remained safe from the mysterious Outers for all those years? As far as Joe could tell, the lack of a formal education hadn’t done him any harm whatsoever. The Outers were to be avoided at all costs—what more did he need to know? As long as he kept to these four walls, his was the best position to be in. For that reason, if ever he had occasion to venture outside, he did so only after the sun went down. And not once in the dark of a starless night had he ever set a single foot beyond the boundary line of cones his mother had painstakingly set up.

Once a week, ever since his birth, his mother left Joe at home alone for an hour or so while she drove into Roswell or Hagerman to purchase their needs for the next seven days. Joe proudly remembered how his

mother sacrificed her own safety to do this for them week after anxious week. She'd been a brave, brave woman, his Mama.

As she drove back to their little haven after shopping each time, she religiously checked to be certain she hadn't been followed. It was plain to see the relief that formed right there on her wrinkled brow when she finally returned safely and could relax enough to take her son's hands in her own, to sing *Bringing in the Sheaves* as loudly as the foil lined walls of their little house could tolerate. Those were truly joyful times.

Several months ago—the last time his Mama went into town—she hadn't come back.

Hank had driven out to deliver the sad and shocking news because, as he'd tried to explain to Joe, she'd been right there in his store when she'd passed.

Joe refused to open the door to him. He wasn't about to fall for a ruse as simple as that. For all he knew, Hank could be one of the Outers his Mama always cautioned him about.

Joe supplied his name when Hank asked and that was all. Nothing more. Said his Mama named him Joe but called him Punkin and even that may have been information a tad too much, he worried later. *Never talk to strangers.*

They'd taken his mother away from him and he wasn't about to give them any more leverage. He refused to believe someone could just drop down dead like Hank said she had, even someone whose shell had become not much more than a wrinkled bag of bones over the years. Joe remembered every single one of her warnings; she'd taught him well. He wouldn't let her down.

A golden tinge on the wall through threadbare draperies told Joe it was dusk and therefore almost time to bring the supplies inside. He struggled into his too-tight, tattered coveralls and donned his specially designed, insulated foil helmet. His mother had fashioned one each for them; she was clever in all sorts of ways—especially with tinfoil which she assured Joe contained special protective properties that deflected brain-washing methods and mind control.

He took a good long look through the hole in the curtain and waited for dark before moving to the door and opening it a crack.

He sniffed.

Nothing.

Everything seemed to be in order.

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Pumpkin Joe nestled into the sag of his worn couch, widening his immense girth with cold pizza, while the tensile strain on his mind was eased considerably by ingestion of copious amounts of soft drink. The sugar hit made him feel more energetic. Confident. Alert. He reached for his last can of Pepsi and was glad delivery day had come around again.

A few hours later Joe rummaged through the battered tin trunk beneath his mother's bed. Under a bulky assortment of yellowed newspapers emblazoned with headlines about some old 1947 UFO crash landing near Roswell and newspaper clipping after well-thumbed clipping of purported alien sightings in the area going back just as far, he brought up a fistful of crumpled cash. It was the last of the substantial savings his mother squirreled away. This could prove a problem.

Joe didn't have a bank account. He didn't have anything but a rusty tin roof over his head. His mother's conscientious withdrawing of her pension payments each month from a bank account held at the Hagerman Post Office kept them both fed. Bank accounts left paper trails and it didn't take a genius to work out a person's privacy could easily be invaded simply by having one. If she could have done away with the government's electronic deposits she would have because she'd trusted banks as much as she had people. Being the pair's sole support, she begrudgingly accepted the automatic payments but took it out just as quickly as it went in.

Since her disappearance and the frightful amount of cash Hank had relieved Joe of—for, in the delivery man's words—a “decent burial for a fine old woman,” the remainder quickly dwindled. Joe hadn't been entirely sure he should've parted with funeral money in the first place but he'd found it far easier to stuff an envelope full of cash and get rid of the stranger. His mother wasn't dead, just taken by the Outers, he was sure of it but he wasn't about to go searching for her.

Never leave the house. Never talk to strangers.

Later in the day Joe donned his foil helmet and pushed the envelope through the thin space beneath the front door, stuffing the old brown towel back across the gap underneath. He moved to the window. When his mother eventually escaped—and she would—and made her way back to him she

would be so very proud to learn he'd implemented her cautionary attitude in her absence.

The familiar dust swirl appeared on the horizon to the east and grew larger as minutes passed. Joe watched Hank empty the van of grocery bags and cases of soft drink, making several trips from vehicle to porch.

"How y'all doin' in there, Pumpkin? You okay?"

"Yup."

Joe waited for Hank to step off the verandah and head to his parked van out front but he didn't. Instead, he hesitated on the bottom tread before ambling back to the front door. Joe couldn't see him through the door of course, but he heard the puzzlement in Hank's tone.

"Umm... there doesn't seem to be the right amount of cash in here."

How should he answer? This wasn't how they did things.

"Pumpkin? You hear me? I said you've come up a bit short this week."

Joe broke out in a clammy sweat. He ran his hands nervously over the two coat hangers atop his helmet to check they were in position and still doing their job. If he stayed silent Hank might just go away and leave him alone.

"Listen, it's just a few bucks. I don't s'pose I mind letting it go today but I'm gonna have to add it to your next order, buddy. With things being how they are 'n' all I can't be carrying anyone. I gotta eat, too."

A long silence followed before Hank spoke again.

"Okay, I guess we'll let it go for now unless you got some spare dollars floating around in there with you?"

His mother hadn't prepared him for a predicament like this. Joe shook.

"Yknow, I'd be glad to run any errands on your behalf if you need me to... well, that is to say, I know your Mama used to do all that kind of thing during her town visits so if you'd like me to I'd be pleased to help."

Hank gazed across the untidy yard to the pickup that hadn't moved an inch since he and a neighbour delivered it back there a few days after Pumpkin's ma keeled over in his store.

Joe's breathing became laboured and he started feeling a strange sensation in the base of his brain.

"I see the cones you have out here 'round the edge of the yard are starting to deteriorate and I was only thinking this morning that seeing as

how you always order rolls and rolls of tinfoil... well, if you thought you could do with a few more cones too it just so happens I have a whole big stack of bright shiny new orange plastic ones in the back of the van. I reckon I could be persuaded to part with them for a few extra dollars."

Did Hank really expect an immediate answer? He would be much happier to write it in a note. Next week. Joe didn't like all this talking. He wasn't supposed to talk to strangers. Hank's jabbering made him feel uncomfortable. He clutched at his head.

"There's no problem. I could add it to what you owe me; special price just for you, Pumpkin."

His mother had vowed that plastic cones and tinfoil were a real deterrent to Outers and he could surely do with more. A person could never have enough cones and tinfoil, she would continually stress.

"S'up to you entirely, o' course; no pressure or anything," Hank went on, "only there's not much call for safety cones in town so if you had an inkling you might like to use them I'd be happy to leave 'em here with you today. Since I've come all this way 'n' all. Save carting them around for another week in the back of the van, y'know?"

Hot dry wind whistled through gaps in the porch planks and swished at the plastic shopping bags.

"Pumpkin? Tell you what, I'm losin' light here and I still gotta deliver to Mrs. Garcia so I have to get moving. I could call past for the money on my way back if you'd prefer, only you're gonna have to make a decision now."

What to do, what to do?

Joe found himself suddenly in somebody's debt, which was against all his mother's hard held principles but he could really do with those extra cones to fill in the gaps. He was one hundred percent positive the Outers were coming; it was just a matter of when. And clearly, Hank knew it too. Why else would he be carrying around a big stack of brand new plastic cones?

Nobody grasped the gravity of the situation. No-one understood the way things were except Joe and his Mama. But Mama wasn't around to take charge any more. And besides, hadn't Hank been kind enough to deliver to the farmhouse since Mama's disappearance? He was hardly a stranger. A stranger is someone you've never met before and Hank had been here every

week for months. Wouldn't a person be a darned fool not to take advantage of a special offer when it was presented to him?

Hank's voice turned impatient. "You want the cones or not, buddy?"

If he accepted them surely it would be doing them both a favour, and besides, supposing the Outers came between now and the next visit and there weren't enough cones out there to prevent them getting through?

"Uhuh."

"I take it that's a yes then?"

"Yup."

"Great. I'll go get them. You've made a good choice."

Joe was thrilled. This was just the sort of wheeling and dealing his mother must have pursued each week in Hagerman but now he was the man of the house and responsible for the decision making. Mother would be proud.

"Where do you want them, Pumpkin?"

Joe willed Hank to leave. Why did the man insist on trying to converse with him when there wasn't a need for talk? For pity's sake just deposit the goddamned cones outside the door with the rest of the goddamned stuff! His body tensed. He needed a sugar hit.

"I'll leave them by the door for you."

Good. Tonight, Joe thought, he would sneak out under cover of darkness and distribute them around the yard. The Outers would never get through a barrier the likes of *this*.

"Well, I'll be seein' you, Pumpkin. You take care now."

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Not for the first time since he'd crept outside, Joe stood upright, tall and rigid. His dark eyes were wide and wary against the starry black night. His entire body tightened in the dry midnight breeze that swept across endless miles of barren pastureland. He scanned the clump of sparse bushes on the opposite side of the dirt road in an attempt to detect movement but not so much as a cricket's chirp interrupted the quiet night.

After long silent minutes he visibly relaxed, tore off another section of tinfoil from its roll and began twisting and pressing it into a tall stiff worm shape to stick into the top hole of the next cone.

Twenty minutes had provided more than enough time to place the latest additions into spaces between the original cones but now came the time-consuming tinfoil antenna replacements atop each one.

Joe stopped again. Sniffed. Listened. He had that uneasy feeling of being watched again. He desperately needed to finish up and get back inside to safety.

And then he heard it. He could swear it sounded like Hank's voice—only it wasn't. Well, not exactly. It felt to him as though he was *sensing* Hank's presence rather than actually hearing him out there calling to him through the dark.

Joe snapped his head towards the house, causing the coat hangers sticking up from his helmet to rattle against each other. The single candle he'd left burning on the windowsill sputtered and cast its eerie pattern over the timberwork, picking up a bulky shadowed shape standing in flickering light at the side of his house.

"Don't be afraid, Pumpkin, I'm not here to harm you."

Joe bolted for the verandah but his cumbersome frame wasn't built for speed or agility. Halfway across the yard he tripped over a clump of dry grass and his own big feet, falling with a heavy thud face first into the dirt, knocking his helmet flying.

"Aaaagghh!" He scurried around in the dust and grass frantically grasping to reach his foil covered headpiece.

"There there, big boy," said Hank calmly. "Take it easy."

The voice was right above him. Joe pulled his arms back towards himself in some absurdly optimistic defensive body hug.

Hank stood between him and his protective headgear. "Need a hand up, buddy? Here, grab a hold."

Hank had an obvious advantage, hovering over him like a hungry vulture with the smell of rotting carrion on his nostrils. Joe thought of rolling towards the porch but he had fallen heavily quite some yards from the sanctuary of his front door.

"There's no need to roll anywhere, Pumpkin. I'm not going to hurt you."

Joe turned his face upwards to face the predator, this Outer who could read his mind. "I'm here to help. I've been waiting for so very long to help you."

Joe gasped. Hank hadn't opened his mouth. He appeared to be reading Joe's mind and communicating thoughts.

My helmet... need my helmet... He couldn't work the insides of his mouth. He'd dried completely.

"Here. If it makes you feel better," Hank telepathed, "take your silly helmet. But it won't do you any good. It doesn't work, y'know. Silver foil is about as useful as those ridiculous safety cones you've got out here. Think about it. If I'm a so-called 'Outer' and I'm the one who delivered them to you, wouldn't they have had some effect on me before now?"

Joe kept his mouth shut tight but directly aimed his thoughts at Hank. "What have you Outers done with my mother?"

"Ah yes, the poor misguided old thing. Such a shame. She really did have a heart attack and drop down dead like a tired old brick. She's gone. Dead, gone and buried. I'm so terribly sorry, Pumpkin."

"No you're not. You're happy she's dead. She always knew you were after us. She warned me about your lot."

"We were never coming for her. It's always been about you, Pumpkin. You're the one we're after. You're the one we want."

"So it's true. I knew it! Mother was right. She's always known. She warned me." He tried to shuffle backwards on his rear end away from whatever this deceptive creature might be.

"Of course she's always known." Hank's thought projections were calm, consoling. "She's kept you from us all these years but we let her be. After all, a mother deserves to have her son. But you're all ours now."

"What do you want with me? My blood? Torture? An experiment on my brain? What do you things exactly *do* with the humans you capture?"

Hank laughed. "You're only part human. You're one of us, Pumpkin."

"No, I'm not. You're an Outer. You're evil." He held up his arm to protect himself.

"Oh, I reckon that if you think long and hard enough, you'll come up with better reasoning than that, won't you? You're an intelligent being. Don't you think it makes more sense that your birth mother feared us taking you away from her? After all, she allowed us to inseminate her. She surely understood you were never wholly hers to keep. She did well all these years to keep you from harm; from the humans. Now they really *are* an evil lot. If it hadn't been for your mother you might've been sliced into a thousand tiny

slivers and be living on slides under the warm glow of government microscopes by now, so we're pleased enough with this outcome."

Joe's resolve faltered. Logically, that could be true. It could also be a deceptive trick to win him over.

Hank proceeded to peel back his human face covering. "Here, take a look." He pulled out a small hand mirror and passed it over.

Joe took a hesitant look at the reflection staring back at him. His large, black, bug-like eyes took in the similarities between Hank and himself. He did not look anything remotely like his mother.

Joe glanced at the porch again. He sighed.

"Yes, you're quite right. We should both go inside. You need a soft drink after all this excitement. It'll boost your green butrifilate acid count. And to tell you the truth, I could do with one myself. Please, let me help you up." Hank reached down and waited for Joe to grip his hand.

It was no use, thought Joe. Each time he thought of a way out, Hank could out manoeuvre him quickly and easily by pre-empting his moves.

Joe allowed Hank to pull him upright. He looked down at his dented helmet lying in the dirt. Hank picked it up and handed it over to him.

"Come on, we have a great deal of news to discuss and you have a lot of learning to catch up on."

Joe looked upon Hank with reservation out the corner of one of his bulbous black eyes. As he moved gingerly by the alien's side towards the flickering light on the porch, he carefully settled the helmet back over his head.

Hank smiled. This could take some time.

## THE THING INSIDE

*Neil Leckman*

*The tempest* came and upon it we were tossed  
Under lightning streaked skies we were lost  
Without warning we were thrown upon the reef  
Left with little more than water and some beef  
We dove deep into turgid water and swam for shore  
No idea what the island ahead might have in store  
Pale against starlit skies stood fungal towers  
Each one topped with crimson flowers  
Morning light found us covered in spore  
Anchored in our flesh at which we tore.  
Phantom shape within the pale forest ran  
The beast was certainly not a man  
Haunting cries upon the warm damp air  
Warned us all, stay away from there  
Something fungal grew within our hair  
Another infestation at which we tear  
It wasn't long before it changed our skin  
There was no way to stop it from getting in  
It doesn't matter who we are or where we've been  
The thing inside had made us all some alien!!

## MEET THE AUTHORS:

**Brian Barnett** lives in Frankfort, Kentucky with his wife, Stephanie, and his two sons.

**Tammy A. Branon** is a freelance writer living and working in the breathtaking Columbia River Gorge in Washington State and has been published in many print and online venues including assorted short stories in numerous anthologies with various independent publishers. She's also a columnist for *Unexplained Mysteries*. For more information, visit her website at [www.tammyabranom.com](http://www.tammyabranom.com)

**Don L. Chance** has been a professional and studio musician for many years. In the same way his natural enjoyment of music led to his becoming a musician, his enjoyment of reading naturally led him into writing his own fiction.

**Dorothy Davies** lives and works on the Isle of Wight, where she writes historical fiction and horror side by side. Her day job is running The Old Curiosity Shop, which is as demanding as her writing. Editing is a big part of her life.

**John H. Dromey** was born in northeast Missouri. He had a mini-mystery published in *Woman's World* and a short story in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, as well as stories of various lengths in anthologies and online at *Liquid Imagination*, *Mysterious-E*, *Sorcerous Signals* and elsewhere.

**Dave Fragments** retired to the countryside of Western Pennsylvania amid the deer, squirrels and his imagination to write short stories. He is published in anthologies from Psychopomp, Static Movement, Red Skies Press, Fantastic Horror, Darkened Horizons, and online at The WiFiles, Kalkion, Perihelion, Golden Visions, Tiny Globule, Yankee Pot Roast, and Flashquake. An occasional poem is available but rare. Dave used to conduct research into coal liquefaction and heterogeneous catalysis and that has morphed into horror, Sci-Fi and Fantasy about robots, strange transformations, demons and satyrs, cavorting simians, the Undead, time travel, devilish happenings and Cthulhu visitations.

**David Frazier** wrote a short story for the book, *Kindred Voices 2* published by the University of Massachusetts and has many poems published on line. *Circus of the Damned* blog published several of his poems. *Harvest Time: Inwood Indiana* has printed a poem of his and work will be printed in several Static Movement anthologies.

**Ken Goldman** is an affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association. Since 1993 his tales have received seven honorable mentions in The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror. His book of short stories, "You Had Me At ARRGH!! : Five Uneasy Pieces by Ken Goldman" (Sam's Dot Publishers) had been an all-time top ten best seller at the former Genre Mall.

**Anna Harris** lives and writes under the warm Australian sun. She loves to travel and incorporates those special places and characters she meets along the way into her stories. Anna also delights in writing about places she's never been to and people she's only invented. She leaves it up to her readers to decide which is which.

**Jeff Jones** is originally from the south but now lives in East Anglia with his wife, two grown-up children and a Border collie who is crazy about Frisbee, despite the cliché. Jeff has published two fantasy novels and is currently working on a third and has just had an anthology of some of his prize winning short ghost stories published, *Tales of terror for a dark night*. He is the author of over 100 short stories and has been published in many Static Movement anthologies.

**Ken L. Jones** has worked as a writer and producer in TV and movies, most notably with Brian Yuzna. He has contributed many short stories and poems to the House Of Horror online magazine and many other publications.

**Kevin L Jones** has been involved with the creative arts for many years and has co-written several comic books. He has contributed several short stories to House of Horror and their anthologies DEADication and Soup of Souls as well as co-authoring the short story collection Mind Rotting Tales available from Panic Press.

**Ron Koppelberger** is a poet, short story writer and artist. He is a member of The Poet's Society, The Fiction Guild as well as The Isles Poetry Association and The Dark Fiction Guild. His art is viewable on Facebook under [will806095@bellsouth.net](mailto:will806095@bellsouth.net).

**Neil Leckman** lives in Colorado with his wife of more than thirty years and only recently began writing seriously. He does it for fun, to share with others and hopes you enjoy the ride.

**Thomas M. Malafarina** ([www.ThomasMMalafarina.com](http://www.ThomasMMalafarina.com)) is an author of horror fiction from Berks County, Pennsylvania. To date he has published four horror novels "Ninety-Nine Souls", "Burn Phone", "Eye Contact" and "Fallen Stones" as well as for collections of horror short stories; "Thirteen Nasty Endings", "Gallery Of Horror", "Malafarina Maleficarum Vol. 1", Malafarina Maleficarum Vol. 2" and most recently "Ghost Shadows". He has also published a book of often strange single panel cartoons called "Yes I Smelled It Too; Cartoons For The Slightly Off Center". All of his books have been published through Sunbury Press. ([www.Sunburypress.com](http://www.Sunburypress.com)).

**Marietta Miles** has stories in the anthologies *One Hour*, *Spring Fever* and the upcoming collections *Long Pig* and *Urban Nightmares Volume II*. Her work can also be found online at Thrillers Killers and Chillers, Flash Fiction Offensive and Lily Childs Femme Fatales. Marietta Miles lives along the James River in Virginia with her husband and two children.

**Stephanie L. Morrell** edited the anthology, *Deals With the Devil* and is thankful to Chris Bartholomew for the opportunity. She has an author's page on Facebook. Her website can be found at <http://www.stephaniemorrell.com>

**David Perlmutter** is a freelance writer living in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, where he has lived his whole life. He is challenged with Asperger's Syndrome, but considers it an asset more than a disability.

**James Richardson** is an Australian living in Vancouver, Canada. He recently finished a Master of Science, majoring in mathematics at the University of British Columbia. This anthology features his first short story.

**Doug Rinaldi;** Originally born and raised in the bowels of Connecticut, Doug graduated college in 1995 and received a degree in Computer Animation and Special Effects for stage and screen. However, writing dark fiction had always been his passion. Currently, Doug's work can be found in various anthologies from such publishers as Static Movement and Horrified Press to name but a few. Also, his two e-book anthologies titled "Manuscript of Deviated Truths, Volume I" and "Volume II" are available through Amazon. Next on his agenda is putting the finishing touches on his screenplays and getting them out in the market and finishing his first novel, "White Island."

**Nathan J.D.L. Rowark:** lives within the ancient fort of London for his sins. He enjoys the macabre, bizarre and is editor-in-chief of *Horrified Press*.

**T.M. Simmler** currently is either reading, writing, petting his dog, watching obscure Eurotrash flicks or working as a night manager at a riverside hotel, a job he once thought appropriate for a horror aficionado. Since the night he dreamt he had been abducted by Whitley Strieber, he doesn't sleep anymore.

**John L. Thompson** currently lives within New Mexico. He works the ungodly grind by day and becomes a chain-smoking writer at night. His stories and poetry have appeared in such publications as *Battlespace*, *Adobe Walls Poetry Anthologies*, *RuneWrights Best Served Cold Anthology*, *Science Fiction Trails* and several *Static Movement Press Anthologies*.

**Shane Ward** spends most of his time knee deep in sci-fi, creating new and wonderful worlds while his daughters run around in the background, doing what all small children do best, make the house a mess. He hopes you enjoy this tale and many more from his website: -[www.shaneward.net](http://www.shaneward.net). He would like to thank Dorothy Davies for including him and wishes to reassure her that he is a kind and gentle person, despite his grim stories.

**Bethany Wilhelm** is a novelist, short story writer and artist. Her stories have appeared in James Ward Kirk's *Indiana Science Fiction 2012* and Static Movement's *Mirror Mirror*. She wrote her first novel at the age of 14 and was recently involved in the filming of Big Biting Pig Production's newest horror movie *Lucid*.

**George Wilhite** came of age staying up late watching *Creature Features* with his father on Saturday nights and has been a horror enthusiast ever since. He has over 100 bylines in horror anthologies and ezines and is an editor for Static Movement. His collection, *Silhouette of Darkness*, is coming in September 2012 from Musa Publishing.

Follow Wilhite at [georgewilhite.blogspot.com](http://georgewilhite.blogspot.com) to receive updates on his writing.

**Matthew Wilson** is a UK resident who has been writing since an early age and lately the terror tales have escaped to various ezines and magazines. He is currently sharing his time between two jobs and one novel.

**Lee Clark Zumpe** has been writing and publishing horror, dark fantasy and speculative fiction since the late 1990s. His work for TBN has been recognized repeatedly by the Florida Press Association, including a first place award for criticism in the 2007 Better Weekly Newspaper Contest. Lee lives on the west coast of Florida with his wife and daughter. Visit [www.leeclarkzumpe.com](http://www.leeclarkzumpe.com).

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